

**Life History:
School Principal as Key Informant**

Ari Najarian – 930686
ANTH-3913
February 19, 2004
Dr. Angela Robinson

When selecting a key informant for ethnographic research, the most suitable candidates are those with the most balanced perspective of the field. As my research deals with the provincial education system, and is focused particularly on a problem within schools themselves, it is reasonable to credit this perspective to the school principal: having experience as a student, teacher and in most cases vice-principal, and closely tied to the upper strata of the institution as well, this position stands at the highest vantage point relevant to my ethnographic problem. It is equally reasonable, then, to expect a life history of the key informant to be the most revealing of the hierarchies of relations, problems, projects and ideals as constructed by the institution itself. For these reasons, I chose to interview the principal of the middle school in which I am presently conducting research. Through an open-ended discussion, I hoped to interpret the respondent's comments in terms of my hypothesis and analytical framework, thus demonstrating their validity. The following pages describe my project-specific hypothesis, methodology, difficulties and observations; the analysis and results will comprise my conclusion.

Before my specific hypothesis can be understood, it is necessary to briefly consider the broader hypothesis and analytical framework. I view students' learning problems and poor performance as consequences of the confused ideals promoted by the education system as it tries to accommodate societal attitudes in a period of transition. As the schools are caught in the middle of two distinct value systems, an effort is made to promote the ideals of both, even if they may be contradictory. This provides the context in which I rationalize my data. Based on this framework, the life history of a key informant becomes an opportunity to test my hypothesis. As I should be able to predict the working conditions of each position in the education system through a set of corollary assumptions proceeding from my hypothesis, said hypothesis would be validated if it provides an accurate prediction of the respondent's replies.

This begs the question: "What are the corollary assumptions of your hypothesis, regarding the position of principal?" I expected the respondent to face key problems that could be reduced to the conflicting ideals promoted by the school system. Examples would be parents who believe their child should be treated a certain way (based on their own interpretation of the institution as a symbol), external pressures from political and welfare institutions to emphasize certain features of learning programmes to match their own interests (passive role in acculturating youth), complications between parents' and teachers' relationships to each other (different value systems coming to a head), and so on. As these are all key problems, I expected the respondent to touch upon them over the course of the interview as "cultural phenomena" of some import to his field. I anticipated the most relevant features of the system to be listed first, or in descending order, during the investigation.

Based on this anticipation, preparing the questions was not as difficult as it may have seemed initially: even open-ended and non-direct questions should reveal what I sought. To ensure the responses were not crafted to favour my research, I organized the questions in a linear fashion followed by journalists or biographers, who place the emphasis on the respondent by default (see attached sheet for a list of key questions). In practice, it proved much more difficult to remain non-direct, especially because the respondent's personality was very down-to-business-like (this was self-admitted). I found that my questions had to be asked in a more direct form than I had hoped, as the respondent would not offer up information freely without considerable prompting. Once the atmosphere became more informal, however, I found it much easier to follow a natural course based on the respondent's replies.

I identify four categories of analysis, under which I grouped all the replies I received: empirical (events, definitions, objective history), features (key problems, hierarchies of relations / ideals, etc.), direct relevance to my hypothesis (talk of

learning problems, ideals...), and meta-deconstruction (the nuances of speech, gestures and animation).¹

Empirical statements served to establish some context for the respondent's subjective value system and rationalize choices, opinions and attitudes displayed during the interview. Some examples are: the respondent has been involved in the field for 26 years, in the capacities of coach (hockey, football), teacher, vice principal and principal at the elementary and middle school level, and so on.

Feature responses were the main content I used to test my hypothesis: the difficulties, responsibilities, roles and ideals seen as important by the respondent. Some examples are: respondent is in charge of everything, "discipline, curriculum, school improvement", feels distant from the classroom and the close relationship he had as a teacher (preferred classroom to physical education, though he was seen as better-suited for it), sees district office and board positions as too abstract to effect any real change, believes he must provide leadership, direction and a vision of how to move his organization, and translate theoretical mandates into practical results (note the emphasis on practical), etc. He identified several feature or key problems, which were of particular interest to my investigation: dealing with upset parents who want to hold "everybody accountable but their child", disciplining and counselling teachers (awkward position as they are both equal members of the workers' union, but unequal in administrative capacity), and the often irrational and idealistic policies of the board that distribute resources inefficiently because of external social pressures such as lobby groups, politicians, health workers etc. He claims that: "Today's society expects schools to be all things to all people," which I found extremely relevant on many different levels of analysis.

When the conversation swayed back to topics of relevance to my hypothesis, the respondent held these opinions: he did not think the system used in high school to

¹ See attached interview sheet for exhaustive list of responses.

distinguish course content discretely (through curriculum, different faculty, classroom location, etc.) was beneficial to students, and valued the elementary system much more, did not care for the board's idealistic policies, especially regarding the immersion program, felt that efforts by the board to have schools take a more active acculturating role were marginalized in favour of numeracy and literacy (under articles of 'social improvement planning', see interview sheet), and felt that those that were not directly involved in the field (i.e. parents) generally could not relate to or appreciate the day-to-day difficulties and problems faced by faculty and administration.

Finally, the phenomena grouped under meta-deconstruction proved to be the most challenging and enjoyable to analyze. Here, I paid particular attention to topics that caused the respondent to get animated and raise his voice (denoting importance: immersion program, traditional values), his particular discourse and idioms (I noticed a *very* consistent and prevalent use of pragmatic language: 'point man', action over theory, 'multitasking', etc.), use of language that might carry implications (e.g. "Today's society ..." implicitly contrasted with 'yesterday's', the meaning of 'improvement' to the board and to the school, "...filtering out bureaucratic nonsense from above") and the constant trend in his thinking to accommodate his action to suit the system's idiosyncrasies, rather than idealizing and seeking to change the system rather than make pragmatic compromises. These phenomena went a long way to helping me understand what was really being said by the respondent, as well as what he really valued.

I was happy with a great deal of the respondent's answers, as they roughly approximated the predictions I had made. Generally, I felt that the features I viewed as prevalent in the system were, in fact, important to the field. However, I had to wrestle with a few findings considerably, as they simply could not be reduced to my hypothesis and would not rationalize. The most relevant of these were the

respondent's speculation as to why parents were so difficult, as well as his description of "yesterday's society" and the role of the school therein. On parents, he felt that the inability to relate or the narrow-mindedness was actually a result of the school system itself! I was, in all honesty, shocked and baffled by this: it made no sense that parents who were taught in a self-contained environment (that did not have the confused ideals of present schools) demonstrated a lack of understanding. Specifically, he believed that parents painted their children's bad teachers with images of the worst teacher they themselves had in school, and evoked images of the strap and corporal punishment to reinforce this notion. On "yesterday's society", the key points were that "teachers were *right*", that their authority was final and unequivocal, and that the schools delivered a "narrow stream" that would not accommodate exceptionally good or poor students, and taught everyone at the same rate. All these observations challenged my notion of the traditional paradigm and its merit as self-contained and consistent with itself. For some time, this portrayal of the "old paradigm" simply would not fit; then I found a solution.

There was a fallacy in the way I constructed my framework: it assumed that all things start out pure and subsequently degenerate. I had held up the traditional paradigm as a model, admittedly more valid than the future paradigm toward which the education system is moving. Rather, I should have put both on equal terms and recognized their respective virtues and faults; having done this, both remain self-contained and consistent, the present situation is still contradictory and transitional, *but the ideal stands apart and outside of any particular model*. This is the proper relativist construction that allows the educational ideal to be shaped by my research, rather than already having existed and merely requiring articulation. Further, it fully rationalizes all the respondent's comments, and thus attains the credibility and merit I was seeking at the outset.