

## Chapter 9

# Critical Reflections on the Study

**Abstract** The critical reflections are kept relatively short compared to the high relevance and possible dimensions which the topics reflected on exhibit. This is the case because they are reflections and not elaborations of the relevant issues. On the one hand, as a constructivist approach towards the field was chosen, my role and background receives attention. On the other hand, the resulting model of “developing a sense of belonging” is discussed from a critical perspective and in the light of educational equity. This chapter provides the potential readers with critical input from myself. It shows that the work at hand has also been critically examined by me. Hence, it gives hints towards issues that could be elaborated more extensively and therefore would contribute to and continue my work.

The following critical reflections are kept relatively short compared to the high relevance and possible dimensions which the topics exhibit. This is the case because they are reflections and not elaborations of the relevant issues. On the one hand, as I chose a constructivist approach towards the field, my own role and background as a researcher receives attention. On the other hand, the resulting model of “developing a sense of belonging” is discussed from a critical perspective.

### Reflections on the Role of the Researcher

Applying grounded theory from a constructivist point of view means that the researcher always influences the results; she is the one who constructs the data together with the research participants. Adams speaks of data as “situated knowledge”, as they are “a product of the relationship between the researcher and her informants” (1999, 360). In other words, the concept of situated knowledge implies that data cannot be collected from the field as something that simply exists. Data are much rather constructed together with the interviewees. “Therefore, an honest presentation of our research requires that we include an explicit analysis of data as the product of a collaboration between ourselves and our informants” (Adams 1999,

360). This collaboration is usually influenced by power relations that were already discussed in the chapter on ethical concerns. These power relations, however, are not always one-sided. In the field research, knowledge production is often teamwork because inputs and outputs are controlled alternating between both parties (Ben-Ari and Enosh 2013, 424). “The final constructed products of knowledge are created from those same inputs and outputs of the ongoing process between researcher and participants” (Ben-Ari and Enosh 2013, 424). During the interview process, for example, it is the interviewee who decides what to say and what not to say. However, the researcher still decides how to work with the data and has a lot of influence on how the results will finally be interpreted.

The participant will always own the construction of meaning she has ascribed to experience, regardless of the interpretation placed upon this by the researcher within the publication of his or her work. Secondly, the *researcher* is the one who has been motivated to explore the theoretical ideas before conducting research, and to try to construct knowledge from experience: it is a practical necessity that some individuals should do so, if we are ever to have any knowledge at all. (Millen 1997)

This conclusion certainly has its validity. However, results should be discussed with participating parties if possible, not to get their consent but to unveil misunderstandings, include their views and be able to identify bias or aspects that have been overseen. This is especially important when conducting research in a country of the majority world with a minority world background. All of these points have ethical implications, which is why researchers are always in the duty of reflecting their actions and learning from their experience (Dennis 2010, 123). It was my intention to identify misunderstandings and understand aspects that seemed to be unclear. This was possible especially during the second phase of interviews, during which the same participants were interviewed for the second time. The beginning of these interviews was used for clarifying points from the last interview and for helping the interviewees to remember what was the content of the interview conducted 1 year before. The results of the analysis were discussed in a workshop in Vienna in a group in which also three members from the staff of the Department for Special Needs Education at the Addis Ababa University participated. It was not possible to directly discuss the results with the participants in Ethiopia. This was only feasible regarding preliminary results from the first phase of field research. These were communicated to the schools during the second phase, and a summary in written form was given to participants who were interested. The children also received a leaflet with information about the results and about what children in the other countries of the larger project had answered. However, unfortunately, discussions about the final results did not take place.

Additionally, it is essential to reflect on the background of the researcher. This can have meaningful influences on the results of a research study. I have an educational background of special needs education as well as of global history. Thus, historical aspects were part of the study from the very beginning, as I give a lot of importance to historical aspects. Furthermore, I grew up in a Western culture in a so-called developed country with good social security and public health systems. Not having lived in poverty nor having a disability as defined in this book, it requires

a considerable amount of reflection processes to be able to approach the field that was studied openly. This is important because essential points raised by the participants might get lost if the researcher is not fully aware of possible bias. Also, being a foreigner to the culture under research yields challenges into the research process. In her second edition of “Constructing Grounded Theory” (2014), Charmaz integrates a chapter on data and cultural contexts. Although this chapter is not very extensive, she writes about the complexities of societies in different cultures that have realities which have historically grown and might not always be accessible for the researcher (Charmaz 2014, 330). I am aware of the fact that many aspects of the field of research might not have been accessible for me. However, there was access to certain data and these were interpreted. Yet, it has to be taken into account that an Ethiopian researcher who grew up in Addis Ababa might have had access to the participants in a different way and hence might have obtained results that could have offered an emic perspective on the realities of the participants’ lifeworlds but would also exhibit certain bias.

## **Critical Discussion of the Concept “Developing a Sense of Belonging”**

Having finished the analysis and interpretation of the data, the part “school access of children with disabilities” of the refined research question could be exchanged with the core category *feeling like a family*. Consequently, the question would be: *In which ways does “feeling like a family” at school support or hinder children, parents and teachers in dealing with emotional stress situations that are created through negative cultural and societal attitudes towards disability?*

From such a perspective, it becomes clear that eventually not barriers and facilitators for the education of children with disabilities were in the focus but barriers and facilitators for developing a sense of belonging, as this was the most important process that could be identified from the emerging categories of the participants’ interviews. The children told us stories about where and how they could help and how other people helped them. These were clear indicators of the importance of community and the support which can be given and received there. Belonging to such a community and a society in general became very meaningful.

The stories which the parents told us had a greater focus on exclusionary aspects grounded in the disabilities of their children. For instance, neighbours and other community members started confrontations or insulted them. On the other hand, positive developments within the communities could also be observed. One teacher supported parents who had children with disabilities in her community. She told them where they could send their children to school and convinced them that they were able to learn etc. Such incidents highlight the influence which a community can have on its members. Therefore, developing a sense of belonging and finding one’s place is very important to anyone living in a community in order to be able to lead a quality life.

*Feeling like a family* thus played a major role. Education, however, assumed the role of a facilitator. As a capability which finally might become a functioning, it helps children to find their place in society.

At this point, it has to be repeated that the majority of the families from the sample were from a poor economic background. Hence, poverty was mostly a fact with which parents and children had to deal. In my discussions about the results with the Ethiopian team from Addis Ababa University, it was highlighted that this also explains the great significance of children supporting their families. According to the Ethiopian colleagues, such expectations cannot be found to this extent in families from more stable economic backgrounds (personal conversation July 3, 2014). A large part of the Ethiopian population – even though it has declined during the last years – still lives in poverty. According to the World Bank (2014), 29.6 % of the Ethiopian people lived below the poverty line<sup>1</sup> in 2011.

Quality education for children with disabilities might decrease poverty if children are enabled to make use of their education and become economically independent. Inclusive education is one aspect that could support such developments. Regarding the result of this book, it is not suggested that *feeling like a family* is the solution for making inclusion successful in Addis Ababa. However, “developing a sense of belonging” to the school in the case of children, parents and teachers is a very strong argument for positive developments regarding quality education for children with disabilities. The aspect of *feeling like a family* is a very peculiar one in this context. It can have positive as well as negative influences on the children. What stood out in this book was that the results seemed to implicate rather positive notions regarding disability and education in certain educational environments. Therefore, it has to be emphasised, first, that many negative aspects were also addressed in the interviews and, second, that family is not only about positive aspects like receiving support but also about duties and responsibilities which might be challenging. Supposing that children would have family duties and relations with their teachers at school, this could have far-reaching consequences for the children. Hence, there are reasons why school is not family for them: schools can be changed; families usually cannot. This means that relationships have different qualities at school, and dependencies have different meanings in the different environments. Children might depend greatly on the support of their families in all of their major life areas. Hence, it is not surprising that the children’s *feeling like a family* gave them a lot of motivation because it provided them with a future perspective of being meaningful to the family as well as independent. However, the *feeling like a family* did not exist in the children towards their teachers. Therefore, they usually “only” depended on teachers regarding education. Yet, also at school, social integration

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<sup>1</sup>A poverty line specifies a society’s minimum standard of living to which everybody in that society should be entitled. This concept is very country-specific. Every society has its own views on what constitutes a minimum standard of living, which is why most countries develop a national methodology to measure poverty accurately and do not solely rely on internationally known poverty lines. However, for international comparisons, the World Bank has developed the well-known ‘\$1 per person per day’ poverty line using purchasing power parities (PPP) and estimating from decile data. (Braithwaite and Mont 2008, 4)

takes place amongst friends and the school community, which indicates that school is not only there for education. The fact that there seemed to be no family feeling in children towards teachers ensures and maintains a certain distance that might be necessary for the children also regarding the teaching learning process. However, even though they were not mentioned by children in this way, relations to friends at school might have similarities to “feeling like a family”, as friendship and supporting peers played an important role for the children with disabilities. This is another aspect yet to be explored in another paper, as mentioned earlier.

Moving from the micro- to the macro-system of the children, the following quotation becomes especially interesting in the light of the discussed collectivist and individualist cultures. Peters argues that in the majority world “personhood depends more on social identity and the fulfilment of family obligations than on individual ability” (2007, 122). This is yet another supporting aspect for the meaning that finding a place in society – and hence developing a social identity – has for children with disabilities in Addis Ababa. Fulfilling family obligations enables children with disabilities to fulfil their social role.

*A social role* is a combination of behaviors, functions, relationships, privileges, duties, and responsibilities that are socially defined, widely understood, and recognized within a society. People who fill roles that are positively valued by others will generally be treated well, whereas persons who occupy devalued roles will typically be treated badly. (Lustig and Strauser 2007, 196)

Being poor and having a disability are conditions that lead towards a devaluation of people in the society. According to Lustig and Strauser (2007), people who exhibit these features usually experience a “variety of harmful life experiences”. A further negative experience for children with disabilities might be a disappointment of the high expectations placed on education. This does not mean that education is useless or not necessary. The problem is the high expectations that are often placed on education only. The feeling of belonging that children were striving for related to community and society is an aspect lying in the future that can still be disappointed. In other words, there is uncertainty about this issue, and the result of their efforts in education is not visible until they leave school. This is an essential aspect; education is perceived as very positive as long as children are at school. It is expected to support children in fulfilling their social role and consequently, according to Lustig and Strauser (2007), be treated well – in other words, be accepted and included in society.

The fact that none of the defined conflicts of children, parents and teachers was finally solved and only preliminary solutions were identified in the school settings is essential. Looking at the whole issue from this perspective, it becomes clear that there might be certain aspects that were not revealed because the *feeling like a family* relieved the participants from addressing them and empowered them temporarily. In this way, *feeling like a family* could also just serve as a strategy for briefly overcoming emotional stress in the particular situation of parents having a child with a disability, teachers not being content with their job and children finding themselves with the conflict of the question of belonging. Yet, the importance of

family, community and social life cannot be ignored in the cultural context of this book. This is also what makes the theory of “developing a sense of belonging” so significant and important.

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