

*An andragogical, critical theory case study to
develop critical pedagogy, in understanding
and transforming social justice within a Non-
Governmental Organisation (NGO) in the
Quang Nam province, Viet Nam*



A day on the water in the Quang Nam province, Viet Nam

When considering critical issues related to equity, diversity and inclusion, it is fundamental to take into account the factors that contribute towards the perceived issue with social justice. Examining these issues through an emphasis on critical theory, critical pedagogy and an analysis as an insider-researcher allows the individual to engage, investigate and understand the social world they are immersed in (Soler et al., 2013). In this research project, I am the insider-researcher and participant as the Research and Project Coordinator of a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), named in this study as AIHC, in the Quang Nam province of central Viet Nam. In my role as a volunteer over a nine-month period, I investigated the social justice issues that had arisen in my initial assessment regarding equity, diversity and inclusion through a qualitative, critical theory case study. Early observations through my own perspective had me identify the struggle to find transformative change in my context in the words of critical theorist Paulo Freire (1996, p.29): ‘to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognise its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity’.

The issues I identified during my early engagement with the NGO stemmed from my experiences and observations on the promotion of social justice, according to the Organisation’s vision and mission statements. My perspective seemed to suggest that most methods of engagement with the Quang Nam province constituents the NGO serves were affected by the consistent interference of the Vietnamese government. For instance, the ‘poor economic status’ – which is what determines whether the NGO can or cannot intervene to help a family or a person – can only be accredited by the government. In my very first experience participating in an event aimed at distributing resources to the ‘poor economic status’ children identified by the Vietnamese government, a close observation of the ceremony and the families attending illustrated a different picture of ‘poor recipients’, compared to those I had previously visited in the rural areas of the province (see appendix 2a and 2b). In my initial views, these observations suggested an issue of power and control and brought me to question the extent to which the concepts of equity, diversity and inclusion were incorporated in the operations of the NGO. These impressions also brought me to question the fairness and validity of the ‘poor economic status’ certification.

This NGO is an Australian-based, Vietnamese-registered charity that ‘seeks to offer culturally, socially and financially appropriate support services to disadvantaged children, to provide them with the resources and opportunities they need to achieve success. The services are developed with no political or religious agenda and will be primarily focused on health and disability, education and housing’ (AIHC, 2013). Articles 25 and 26 of the United Nations (2017) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see appendix 1) constitute the basis of the NGO’s vision and mission statement.

My early observations through direct experience led me to question the delivery of this statement due to the hegemony and power the Vietnamese government seemed to have on the NGO's operations.

An article by Adam Fforde (2011, p. 165) examining contemporary Vietnamese politics argues that many opportunities remain for political rethinking in the country. His inquiry addresses policies related to rural development, poverty and participation – the political context I found myself immersed in as an insider-researcher. My initial approach for transformative change was therefore aimed at gaining a critical understanding of how social justice could or needed to be improved within the NGO for the benefit of its constituents.

A second analysis, supported by the review of relevant literature coupled with several direct observations and the collection of data through different channels, allowed me to deepen my understanding of the context and restructure the framework and aims of my study.

Barbara Rogoff (2003, in The Open University, 2017a) argues that when we focus on practice, our analysis needs to be 'informed by background information'. It is evident that the areas problematised in this context are inextricably connected to history, political and cultural discourses, the concepts of hegemony and class, and the resulting relationship between various individuals. In order for me to understand my own perceptions and where policy and people meet in this situation, I had to consider, as emphasised by Gray (2009 in The Open University, 2017b), the 'contradictions inherent between approaches to social justice and the underlying problems from which they emerge'.

Though I was initially planning on researching from a distinct interpretivist paradigm with an action research methodological framework, I soon realised that the immovable forces exterior to the NGO would not provide an adequate platform for an action research to take place. On the other hand, a case study would enable me to investigate and suggest actions that could lead to transformative change within the NGO 'for wider application or to illustrate problems in policy or practice' (Costley et al., 2010, p. 89).

In my case study, I have chosen to focus on qualitative data rather than quantitative, and it appeared that a critical ethnographic reflection that incorporated critical theory and critical pedagogy would be the most authentic approach. Costley et al. (2010, p. 84) emphasise that 'critical theory regards reality as being shaped over time by a wide range of social and cultural values, with knowledge subject to individual and cultural construction'. This approach therefore sought historical and structural insights that would allow for a critique of the status quo and enable emancipatory action. In this light, when taking into account the educational paradigms of teaching and learning with

adults in the NGO, it appeared that the educational theory of andragogy would be the most suitable method to develop my critical pedagogy in this context.

This research design would allow for an unbiased reflection and critical analysis, providing opportunities for critical pedagogy to emerge, while focusing on myself as a critical being. Further reflections triggered by the tutorials, the readings and the considerations made in my TMAs allowed me to reorganise my initially too broad focus and shift the emphasis from the exterior forces surrounding the NGO to the operations within the NGO. I realised that I was not an insider of the external socio-political forces in Viet Nam, and that I could not influence those forces for transformative change. My primary role as an insider-researcher was to be critical in order to find out whether transformative change was needed and how it could be implemented or facilitated within the NGO.

Taking into account my ‘social situatedness’ (Vygotsky, 1962 in Costley et al., 2010, p. 1) in this context, this critical theory case study therefore inquired into how I could develop my own critical pedagogy and facilitate or identify opportunities for transformative change within the NGO to promote equity, diversity and inclusion, according to the following question and sub-questions:

Research question

How can social justice be improved within the NGO for the equity, diversity and inclusion of its constituents according to its vision and mission?

Sub-questions

What forms of knowledge can be identified within the NGO?

Why is an improvement of social justice needed?

How can I transform the current situation?

Throughout this experience as an insider-researcher, ethics was a crucial element in developing trust among all the participants. As the focus of the NGO’s operations is all about disability, health and education, care and confidentiality were imperative. Pseudonyms were used and permission from the NGO was sought prior to using any doctored images or data gathered, with particular caution when dealing with confidential or sensitive material, as recommended by Costley et al. (2010). Haraway’s (1991, in Costley et al., 2010, p. 30) comment on how ‘knowledge claims can be treated differently according to the socio-economic positioning and location of the subjects or research and the researchers’ has helped me reflect on the potential biases of my critical theory case

study. I realised that in my context, I was a white, Western-European person with a democratic background. None of these characteristics were shared by the other participants (NGO staff and constituents), and I therefore needed to ensure that I was not influencing with my own positioning the data I was collecting. This consideration guided the careful formulation of my questions and follow-up questions, and it helped me reflect on my ethical responsibility in conforming to the local laws and norms of Viet Nam.

The data collection was informed by Costley et al.'s (2010, p. 89) description of the ethnographic approach as 'going into (or being in) "the field" and collecting primarily unstructured data through methods such as observation, discussions and interviews to explore and illustrate a social situation'. The data available for collection in my context included photography, observations, field and anecdotal notes, historical and administrative evidence, and, as a primary source of information, interviews and group discussions (semi-structured and unstructured). The framework of this research was designed through overlapping phases implemented over a nine-month period (a brief outline of the trimesters is detailed in appendix 3).

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