

Getting Past the Gatekeepers: Differences Between Access and Cooperation in Public School Research

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This article describes differences in access and cooperation in four qualitative research studies in public schools. Gatekeepers grant formal access but withhold cooperation if they think studies threaten them or their schools. Project approval by official gatekeepers does not guarantee cooperation from informal gatekeepers and participants. The author describes gatekeepers' practices to grant or withhold access and cooperation and the influence of perceived benefits and threats to cooperation. The article concludes with lessons from these research experiences that may lead to more cooperative relationships between researchers and gatekeepers.

Keywords: access; cooperation; interviewing; public school research

Accessing research sites and participants has continued to challenge fieldworkers since the days of Boas and Malinowski (Van Maanen 1998). Methodological texts typically devote a chapter to accessing the field (Burgess 1991; Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Glesne 1999; Patton 2002; Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). Missing is a discussion of the difference between gaining official permission to conduct research and having participants' assistance at the research site. The terms *access* and *cooperation* are often used interchangeably to describe these two distinct processes (Johnson 1975; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Van Maanen 1998; Glesne 1999; Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Rossman and Rallis 2003). However, gatekeepers' approval will not guarantee full cooperation from participants (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) advise that official permission to conduct a study may "be sabotaged by the subjects" (p. 76), requiring that "permission will have to be sought and

I wish to thank the students and gatekeepers who participated in the projects described in this article. These individuals taught me many important lessons about the complexities of establishing working relationships in the field.

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cooperation gained as you move out into new territories and meet new people” (p. 78).

This article describes four public school research projects that illustrate the differences between gaining access to conduct a research project and earning the cooperation of gatekeepers and participants to collect data. My students and I faced challenges gaining cooperation that provided insights into the following research questions:

- Who grants access and cooperation?
- What are the differences between access and cooperation?
- How do perceived benefits or threats influence granting of access and cooperation?
- How do gatekeepers and participants withhold cooperation when access has been granted?

After reviewing the methodological literature on access, I describe the background, research practices, and four research projects that are the basis of this article. Next, I discuss gatekeepers’ granting or withholding access and cooperation, relationships that earn cooperation, perceived benefits and threats of participation, and tactics to resist cooperating. I conclude by discussing the lessons that my students and I learned about gaining access and cooperation, along with recommendations for other researchers.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Gaining official access to research sites and participants is unique to each study. Potential gatekeepers and participants interpret what they are asked to do in their own social context (Hughes 1960; Wax 1971; Johnson 1975; Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz 1980; Magolda 2000; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). Researchers must learn the social structure of a research site to successfully negotiate entry (Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz 1980; Burgess 1991; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003; Berg 2004).

Negotiating access is based on building relationships with gatekeepers, which is an ill-defined, unpredictable, uncontrollable process (Burgess 1991; Maruyama and Deno 1992; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). Researchers typically negotiate access with influential gatekeepers at multiple entry points to the research site (Hughes 1960; Johnson 1975; Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz 1980; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Patton 2002; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003; Marshall and Rossman 2006). Formal gatekeepers in positions of power in bureaucracies have the authority to grant official permission and sponsor research for specific entry

points (Geer 1970; Johnson 1975; Burgess 1991; Shaffir and Stebbins 1991; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Glesne 1999; Bell 2003; Rossman and Rallis 2003; Berg 2004). Informal gatekeepers within the organization often protect research settings and participants, particularly vulnerable individuals (Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003; Berg 2004).

Although it is important to determine with whom in the hierarchy to speak and to receive official approval from the highest level, starting at the top can be risky (Glesne 1999; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). Gatekeepers at the top may deny approval when the researcher already has gained acceptance at lower organizational levels. High-level gatekeepers tend to channel researchers into existing networks in the organization and away from sensitive areas (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). When researchers need official approval from multiple levels of gatekeepers, knowing where to begin is even more problematic (Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003; Rossman and Rallis 2003; Marshall and Rossman 2006). Van Maanen (1998) best describes the process of gaining access as a “continuous push and pull between fieldworker and informant” (p. 144).

In summary, the literature focuses on the researcher and treats access and cooperation as one process. Yet gatekeepers may be uncooperative so as to avoid participating in officially approved studies. Shifting the focus from the role of the researcher to that of gatekeepers and the techniques they use to grant or deny cooperation helps explain this ambiguous process.

BACKGROUND

An instructor of a graduate qualitative research course, I assign fieldwork projects as a class requirement and conduct my own field research. In this article, I describe three class projects and one of my studies that exemplify differences in access and cooperation. In all four projects, my students and I struggled to get cooperation when access had been granted. One student's comment to her classmate who had been turned down for several interviews—“That's the difference between access and cooperation”—gave me the idea for this article. I reflected on project planning meetings, conversations with gatekeepers, and class discussions with my students about obstacles that limit cooperation. Because none of the studies were intended to examine access, cooperation, or gatekeeper issues, the students and I did not collect empirical data about access and cooperation, which is a limitation of this article. I began making reflective notes of conversations and class discussions after the student comment that led to this article.

RESEARCH PRACTICES

My students and I used the same research processes in all four studies. This section explains how I designed the studies, worked with official gatekeepers to gain access, and trained students to contact and interview participants. I used a similar process for my own project.

Designing Projects

I collaborated with official gatekeepers and administrators at district and building levels to design the studies. Ideas for three projects were mine. The topic of the fourth project, curriculum for struggling readers, was suggested by an official gatekeeper. I explained that class projects were intended to serve two purposes. First, each project was to provide information about an identified issue of interest to each school district. Second, class projects were intended to train PhD students to conduct qualitative research. My project also examined a research topic to be disseminated via publication to the educational research community. All projects described participants' attitudes and thoughts about school-related issues. Three projects sought parents' perceptions about parental involvement; the fourth solicited teachers' opinions about a new reading curriculum. I prepared a research proposal that explained each study's topic, data collection methods, and time line. Gatekeepers and I collaboratively modified details of data collection to accommodate school schedules.

Gaining Access

Using the known sponsor model to gain entry (Patton 2002), I approached administrators in schools and districts that have positive relationships with the university where I teach. These administrators value research that university professors and students conduct in their districts. They had used information from my past projects to modify their practices and thought proposed projects would be useful. Their support made gaining official approval to conduct research straightforward. They sponsored projects, signed letters to participants, and gave permission to work with gatekeepers at research sites to collect data.

Training Students

After explaining the projects to students, I worked with them to write semi-structured interview guides that followed an identical organizational plan: two or three open questions with specific topics for probing if participants needed

more explanation. Students formulated questions that I used to create master semistructured interview guides. Students followed their project's guide so data would be comparable for coding and analysis.

I trained students to interview after they read chapters from introductory qualitative methods texts (Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Marshall and Rossman 2006). We discussed basic interviewing techniques, including establishing rapport, questioning, listening, and probing. I conducted demonstration interviews with official gatekeepers who had given us access. The students and I discussed my demonstration interviews and revised the interview guides as needed. Next, the students began contacting potential participants.

Working with Participants

Gatekeepers at research sites had recommended potential participants according to each study's criteria for participation. I randomly assigned my students to nominated individuals. Students sent their assigned participants letters explaining the projects and telephoned them a few days later. The letters, cosigned by official gatekeepers and me, explained that participation was voluntary and confidential. Students arranged interviews at willing participants' convenience. All interviews followed interview guides and were transcribed with reflective notes. I coached students through data collection, suggesting ways to improve contacting and interviewing participants. I followed the same interviewing process in my study.

THE PROJECTS

Next, I briefly describe each project's purpose, design, and gatekeepers' strategies in granting access and cooperation (see Table 1 for a summary of the projects).

Parental Involvement at Cavitt Elementary School

To define meaningful parental involvement from parents' perspectives, twelve researchers interviewed forty-eight randomly selected parents in one elementary school. The official gatekeeper, the principal, supported the project and granted complete access by providing a directory of all parents whose children attended the school. The alphabetical listing of names was numbered consecutively, beginning with 1. I used a random numbers table to select forty-eight parents from the list as potential participants. This representative sample included parents whose involvement ranged from little to extensive participation in the school. Most parents agreed to be

TABLE I
Research Projects

Project	Purpose	Design	Access	Cooperation
Cavitt	Parents' definitions of meaningful parental involvement.	Interview study of forty-eight randomly selected parents in one elementary school.	Principal gave author roster of parents.	Most parents agreed to interviews.
Rolling Hills	Describe barriers to parental involvement.	Interview study of K-12 parents with both positive and negative school experiences.	Superintendent approved project.	Principals provided names of positive parents and, reluctantly, negative parents.
Bailey's Grove	Identify personal situations that prevent parents' involvement.	Interview study of parents from four family resource centers.	Associate superintendent granted access to center directors with supervisor's approval.	Two directors cooperated; two resisted.
Stewart City	Obtain teachers' opinion of reading curriculum.	Interview study of teachers using new reading materials.	Curriculum director suggested project and asked principals to volunteer.	Four principals volunteered but denied permission to contact teachers.

interviewed, resulting in a cooperative relationship between participants and my students.

Barriers to Parental Involvement in Rolling Hills

I conducted a study of parents' perspectives of barriers to parental involvement in schools, according to parents in one district. The superintendent granted access and required all building principals to cooperate by giving me parents' names. I specifically requested two lists of parents: those who enjoyed positive relationships and those who had experienced negative relationships with their children's schools. All principals cooperated by providing a list of parents with positive experiences, but only one

principal supplied names of parents with negative school experiences. I asked the superintendent to help me get names of parents who had experienced difficulties. He and the principals brainstormed a list of names at an administrative cabinet meeting. Parents with positive experiences were more cooperative in being interviewed than parents with negative experiences, who often failed to keep appointments for interviews.

Challenges to Involvement in Bailey's Grove Schools

This project examined situations in parents' lives that limited involvement in their children's schools. The associate superintendent of an urban district with fourteen elementary schools supported the project and requested that elementary principals provide names of parents who typically were not involved at their children's schools. Principals refused to cooperate, fearing that they would be labeling parents as "not caring." Four elementary schools had family resource centers that worked with families in stressful situations. The associate superintendent suggested working with the directors of these centers and their supervisor to identify parents for interviews. At his request, the supervisor agreed to grant access and asked her directors to participate. After voicing many concerns about the project, the directors agreed. I assigned twelve student researchers in teams of three to the four center directors. Once the project began, two directors eagerly cooperated, but the other two used various tactics to avoid participation.

Teaching Reading in Stewart City

Four students sought teachers' perceptions of a new curriculum to help struggling readers. Struggling readers were children who were not in special education but were behind grade level in reading proficiency. Having purchased a new reading series, the curriculum director was interested in teachers' opinions about the materials. At an administrative council meeting, she asked principals to volunteer for the project. Four principals volunteered; one student was assigned to work with each principal. I asked principals to nominate teachers for interviews. Principals granted access by providing teachers' names, but they offered minimal cooperation by denying my students permission to make personal contact with teachers.

GATEKEEPERS' ACCESS AND COOPERATION

Formal gatekeepers at multiple organizational levels with authority to grant both access and cooperation made gaining entry anything but a straightforward

task (Magolda 2000). The number of gatekeepers and organizational levels they represented influenced how readily we gained official approval and practical assistance. One gatekeeper (principal) represented one elementary building at Cavitt, whereas six gatekeepers (associate superintendent, supervisor, and four directors of family resource centers) represented three levels of the organization (central office, support staff, and centers) in Bailey's Grove. Rolling Hills and Stewart City each had two organizational levels of gatekeepers—central office (superintendent and curriculum director) and building administration (seven principals in Rolling Hills and four in Stewart City). Working with fewer gatekeepers and organizational levels presented the fewest obstacles. More gatekeepers and organizational levels presented greater challenges.

Official Approval

In all four projects, I knew gatekeepers at the highest organizational levels from previous research or professional relationships. I had conducted class projects in the districts where Cavitt, Bailey's Grove, and Stewart City were located. The superintendent of Rolling Hills was a graduate of the department where I am a faculty member. Gatekeepers knew that they would get the promised information in exchange for participating, exemplifying Patton's (2002) recommendation to use reciprocity to negotiate access. Once the gatekeepers understood what their schools were being asked to do and what they would receive in return, they gave official permission to conduct the studies.

Informal Cooperation

My students and I needed gatekeepers' cooperation with practical tasks. They could provide participants' names and contact information. If needed, they could arrange interviews and explain projects to participants. Cooperation required time, effort, and willingness to help us.

Although official gatekeepers supervised the organizational level whose cooperation we needed, I quickly learned that their permission did not earn us cooperation at lower levels (Johnson 1975; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Glesne 1999; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). The Cavitt principal assumed final authority for granting access and cooperation. When I asked her if I should get the superintendent's permission, she offered to "run it by her." The principal saved me from negotiating access and possible refusal at the highest organizational level and assured me that I would have the help we needed. Higher level gatekeepers in the other projects were not directly involved in the buildings and centers where we wanted to interview participants. Their limited

ability to ensure cooperation was obvious from several principals' and two family resource center directors' reluctance to help contact parents and teachers. Not knowing me or my previous work, they felt "ordered to cooperate" (Glesne 1999: 39) by their superiors.

Bailey's Grove best exemplifies informal gatekeepers' feeling pressured to participate. The associate superintendent called an organizational meeting with the supervisor and directors of the family resource centers. He thought we were going to work out logistics of data collection. Instead, we spent nearly two hours explaining the project, assuring directors that this project would not harm their centers. The directors offered endless possibilities about how difficult it would be to arrange interviews. One director pointed out that most parents had limited time and unreliable transportation to come to the school. For parents working two jobs, she thought it would be nearly impossible to arrange interviews in their homes or the school at any time. Anticipating her refusal to cooperate, I was surprised when she said, "This is going to be tough, but you tell me what to do and I'll do it. This work is so important; I support you and applaud you for doing it." Despite her concerns, she proved to be an extremely cooperative gatekeeper. Her support persuaded the other directors to reluctantly agree to participate. The associate superintendent commented to me after the meeting, "I had no idea it was going to be this way." His support had provided little incentive to cooperate.

Intermediate Gatekeepers

Although principals in Rolling Hills and Stewart City and directors in Bailey's Grove agreed to participate, they protected participants (Rossman and Rallis 2003). They were in a unique position as intermediate gatekeepers who held formal authority positions but also had informal relationships with the participants. They knew who among parents and teachers would have the knowledge we sought. At one extreme, intermediate gatekeepers provided names of participants, showed us around their schools, took us to dinner, drove participants to the schools, and told us how much they valued the research. By using a number of strategies discussed later as resistance tactics, other intermediate gatekeepers limited or prevented data collection.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Researchers agree that access is gained by building positive relationships with gatekeepers (Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). As would be

expected, my students and I earned cooperation by developing empathetic relationships with gatekeepers and participants. Ironically, I got cooperation in Rolling Hills from gatekeepers and participants who had difficult relationships with other gatekeepers.

Empathetic Relationships

Traditional rapport-building techniques did little to gain cooperation. Spending time in the schools, attending events, and visiting with people did not give my students and me more interviews. Finding something we personally had in common with gatekeepers and participants earned their cooperation. Using a "role constructing" (Wax 1971:17) process helped my students and me develop empathetic relationships.

Intermediate gatekeepers and participants could be cooperative with one of my students and totally uncooperative with another even though the students were working on the same project. Students who simply explained their assignments had problems getting interviews. By explaining that they were part-time graduate students and teachers themselves, other students related to principals, directors, and teachers who also were graduate students. Gatekeepers and participants related to students who were juggling jobs, families, and assignments.

Interviewing parents also required a personal connection. Regardless of professional position, researchers who successfully gained parents' cooperation related to them as parents. As I approached parents in Rolling Hills, a blue-collar community, they were nervous talking to a university professor. They were not interested in research but wanted to talk to another parent about what it is like to be a parent working with the schools. My students gained cooperation if they talked to parents about their own children. Some students gained cooperation by explaining that they were going to be parents in the next few months. Regardless of the specific approach, we gained cooperation by relating to people as people.

Negative Relationships

Official gatekeepers' relationships with intermediate gatekeepers had a surprising effect on cooperation. Logically, intermediate gatekeepers would support their supervisors, but I found the opposite situation in Rolling Hills. One principal disagreed with the superintendent on many issues and thought his job was in jeopardy. In fact, his contract was not renewed at the end of the year. I would have predicted that he would not cooperate, given that the superintendent supported the project. Yet he helped me by giving me names of "challenging parents," arranging interviews in his office, and

continually telling me how he valued the study. Later, he told me that his participation validated him as a professional at a very difficult time in his career. The fact that I sought his cooperation was "the highlight of the year."

A negative relationship between a Rolling Hills principal and parent encouraged her cooperation. The principal gave me the name of a mother who was unhappy with special education services her son was receiving. She was surprised and pleased to help me. When I called her, she said, "I can't believe the school gave you my name! Of course, I'll tell you what I think."

PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND THREATS

Gatekeepers' cooperation was influenced by what they perceived were benefits and threats to participation. If gatekeepers thought a project would benefit them, they would more likely cooperate. They were less likely to participate if they felt threatened personally or thought their jobs were threatened. Benefits and threats depended on individual situations. Participants who feared they would receive poor teaching evaluations or that their family resource centers would be closed resisted participation. Gatekeepers at all organizational levels asked about the level of commitment, but they would give whatever help was needed once they were comfortable with the projects. Gatekeepers perceived opportunities for public relations, issues of power, and accountability for schooling as both benefits and threats.

Public Relations

Gatekeepers cooperated if projects could provide positive images of the school and tried to avoid projects that dealt with sensitive issues that could portray the school negatively. The Cavitt project had potential for good publicity. Endorsing a project that valued all parents' opinions presented the school in a positive light. The benefit of positive comments outweighed the risk of parents criticizing the school. At the other extreme, Rolling Hills' administrators wanted to avoid the negative image of parents identifying barriers to involvement. After I began collecting data, I learned that a group of parents had complained to the board of education about a new "early out" policy that would dismiss school early one day a week to give teachers time to collaborate on curriculum. The policy had received negative press. One mother had attended board meetings and been quoted in the local paper. Although administrators did not want her to start criticizing school policy again, they gave me permission to talk to her after I had been in the district for several months. They reluctantly decided the benefits of letting all parents be heard outweighed possible criticism of not listening.

Power

Issues of power usually were not expressed verbally, yet power relationships affected how willingly gatekeepers and participants cooperated. My students and I learned that distance from official gatekeepers and power to make duty assignments negatively affected cooperation.

Not surprisingly, intermediate gatekeepers and participants were resentful if they thought they were “required” to participate. Intermediate gatekeepers felt powerless to challenge expectations of higher level gatekeepers. One Rolling Hills principal said, “I don’t have time for this, but Dave (superintendent) wants it done. Here are the names you want.” Although this principal resented having to cooperate, he did not feel as threatened as gatekeepers and participants who were further removed from official gatekeepers. Those furthest removed were most visibly threatened by official gatekeepers’ support. At the Bailey’s Grove planning meeting, directors nervously glanced at the associate superintendent each time they asked a question. Their supervisor served as mediator between her directors and the associate superintendent. Her link in the hierarchy helped alleviate their concerns, but they were obviously worried about the power the associate superintendent had over their centers. The supervisor was poised at the meeting, but she too felt that she had to accommodate the associate superintendent’s request. Teachers perceived power as coercive in a slightly different way. They thought direct pressure of authority figures simply meant they “had to” participate. Their resentment or fears were expressed as concerns about accountability for their students’ academic performance.

Accountability

The Bailey’s Grove and Stewart City projects were conducted after the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. The pressures teachers felt from the demands for student achievement had an impact on directors’ and teachers’ cooperation. Teachers suspected that there were unstated reasons that the district wanted to do these projects. Directors thought the data could be used to evaluate and close the centers, a legitimate concern because they worked with the lowest performing students. Centers were funded on grant money that increased directors’ concerns about centers’ future existence. Directors were not convinced that the district could use findings from the project to support continuing the centers. Reading teachers in Stewart City thought that the district was evaluating how well they were teaching reading to raise test scores. A vocal teacher disputed the fact that information would be used for future curriculum decisions and expenditures rather than teacher evaluation. She complained, “Administration

wants to check up on us.” Teachers who thought the project was conducted at the district’s request were uncooperative. After one teacher realized that my students were at the school to conduct an interview and not to train teachers to use the new curriculum, she demanded loudly that they pick up their materials and leave her classroom immediately. Other teachers who had agreed to participate, visibly embarrassed by their colleague’s behavior, told my students they were comfortable expressing their opinions and invited them to another classroom to conduct the interview.

FAILING TO COOPERATE: RESISTANCE TACTICS

Anxious gatekeepers stonewalled my students and me, delaying or preventing our contacting and interviewing participants. To avoid cooperation, they shifted responsibility to others in the organization, controlled communication, requested additional information, and forgot to follow through on promises of assistance.

Passing Responsibility

Uncooperative gatekeepers and participants passed on responsibility and blame to avoid openly refusing to cooperate. A Rolling Hills principal said, “These parents [with negative school experiences] have such chaotic lives that they cannot get organized. You won’t get interviews.” After he gave me parents’ names, most welcomed the opportunity to talk about barriers to their involvement. The principals in Bailey’s Grove who did not want to be blamed for calling parents uninvolved recommended that I work with family resource center directors and their supervisor, thereby passing responsibility to cooperate down the hierarchical chain. Teachers in Stewart City blamed the No Child Left Behind legislation and district record-keeping policies for taking all of their time, leaving them with no room in their schedules for interviews. Stewart City principals also blamed central administration for the record-keeping duties that left their teachers without enough time to participate.

Controlling Communication

Principals in Stewart City kept my students from contacting teachers by insisting that all communication go through them. They wanted to “serve as communication liaisons.” The principals appeared to be granting access, but their ineffective communication methods prevented teachers’ cooperation. Principals requested volunteers for interviews in the schools’ daily announcements, weekly newsletters, and e-mails. None of the principals spoke

personally with teachers to solicit their participation. Not surprisingly, formal announcements and e-mails generated very few volunteers. Principals required my students to communicate with them and the teachers who volunteered through e-mail. Principals would not answer e-mail requests for additional teachers' names. When my students stopped by principals' offices to ask for more names, principals flatly stated that they did not know what more they could do; teachers had not expressed interest. Principals refused to allow my students to stop by teachers' classrooms to schedule interviews. Preventing all personal contact prohibited or limited data collection by denying my students the opportunity to build relationships with teachers.

Requesting Information

A particularly frustrating and somewhat less obvious resistance tactic was requests for more, different, and repeated information. One family resource center director delayed data collection for several weeks by repeatedly asking for clarification on project details. Then she would either lose the information or ask my students to prepare additional materials. She asked them to prepare multiple drafts of flyers to solicit parents' participation. Once a draft was completed following her requirements for specific wording, she would find new problems with wording or formatting. Until the drafts met her changing expectations, she would not identify parents for interviews. Her requests seemed legitimate in the beginning, but they became annoying over time. Too late into the project, the students realized the director was avoiding participation. They spent half of the time scheduled for data collection trying to accommodate the director's requests for information. In the end, they conducted few interviews.

Forgetting

When all else failed, "forgetting" was an effective tactic. It seemed reasonable that gatekeepers, all busy professionals, might forget to help arrange an interview. After gatekeepers kept forgetting to perform tasks as promised, it became obvious that forgetting was a method of telling researchers no while appearing to be cooperative. Some excuses were bold. Directors routinely drove mothers without cars to doctors' appointments, the grocery store, or welfare office, but they "forgot" to pick them up as promised for interviews. It was difficult to stop seeking assistance of individuals who could put us in contact with participants. However, we learned to establish limits on how many times to reschedule interviews that had been forgotten.

LESSONS LEARNED: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GREATER COOPERATION

My students and I completed all four projects, some with less data than we had originally hoped. Gatekeepers told us that our work was meaningful and useful. The projects did not harm and perhaps helped gatekeepers, participants, and the research sites. Bailey's Grove now has expanded the number of family resource centers, and those where my students collected data have remained open. Stewart City continues to purchase materials to help struggling readers. Rolling Hills remains committed to working with parents; not surprisingly, not all parents are always happy. Cavitt still encourages all parents to be involved in the school. These projects provided rich learning and teaching opportunities for my students and me. My students and I learned that cooperation is best gained by understanding social power, having open lines of communication, and knowing when yes means no.

Social Power

Having a better understanding of the differences between formal legal power to require compliance and informal social power to influence behavior in the schools and districts would have helped my students and me gain cooperation. Formal leaders at district and school levels had authority to grant access, but people in building-level positions had the ability to influence others to help with research projects. Central office administrators had legal power to grant formal access and, to a limited extent, require those lower in the hierarchy to participate. Intermediate gatekeepers in formal positions of authority had social power in their buildings or centers. Social power leaders were able to influence their colleagues, subordinates, and superiors to cooperate or put up roadblocks.

Even though I knew formal leaders in these districts, my students and I would have gained cooperation more easily through intermediate gatekeepers, who could encourage participation. Because gaining access and cooperation can require extensive negotiation in bureaucratic organizations (Johnson 1975), analyzing social power in Rolling Hills, Bailey's Grove, and Stewart City would have helped my students and me negotiate. Maruyama and Deno (1992) advise researchers to ask persons in schools how they think ideas get spread and how changes get made. They also recommend watching how others on the staff view the researcher's sponsor. We could have used a specific technique to study social power.

Powers's (1965) reputational technique would have identified informal leaders and their relationships to others in these projects. Ignored for decades, Powers's technique lays out a process by which the social power leaders and

informal relationships of any organization may be determined. Briefly, Powers recommends asking individuals in a community, in this case a school district, a question that will identify influential people. Next, the question is asked of everyone who received multiple nominations in the first round of questioning. This process generates a list of individuals with social power and influence and identifies relationships between social power leaders and formal leaders. Powers (1965) provides more details about the reputational technique in his monograph. His technique satisfies the concerns of most scholars to identify the extent of a sponsor's influence, gatekeepers at different points in the organization, and their influence on data collection (Burgess 1991). Conducting a reputational study to determine who has formal and informal power would have identified formal leaders with power to grant access and social power leaders with influence to cooperate. This process would have highlighted potential problems gaining cooperation in studies with expected or real resistance (Patton 2002), particularly Rolling Hills, Bailey Center, and Stewart City.

Communication Lines

When gatekeepers served as communication channels, my students had few conversations with potential participants. They would have liked permission to talk to participants, which was granted at Cavitt. Being allowed to make personal contact with participants encouraged participation. With limited success, my students and I convinced gatekeepers that they should not have to do the work of soliciting and arranging interviews. When gatekeepers required all communication to go through them, my students were powerless to establish relationships that encouraged participation.

Reading Indirect Communication

Gatekeepers did not say no directly in any of these projects. It was challenging to advise my students about how to get cooperation from participants who were committed verbally but whose actions showed their refusal to participate. It was obvious that many issues were behind the lack of cooperation, but the issues themselves were not always apparent during the projects. My students and I learned that the first step to gaining cooperation is to understand the gatekeepers' perspectives.

CONCLUSION

My students and I faced challenges that have implications for novice and experienced researchers alike. Working with uncooperative participants

after securing official approval placed us in an awkward position (Wax 1971; Shaffir and Stebbins 1991). We found ourselves in a predicament that exemplifies what other researchers have called a difficult, ill-defined, and unpredictable process (Burgess 1991; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). Our experiences contribute to an understanding of gaining entry, cooperation, and, ultimately, participation processes that are not discrete and linear (Glesne 1999; Magolda 2000; Bogdan and Biklen 2003). Each project reinforced the well-established belief that access does not guarantee cooperation (Hughes 1960; Johnson 1975; Burgess 1991) and taught my students and me that certain strategies may gain greater cooperation. Other researchers caught in this dilemma will have the greatest chance of full cooperation by remaining flexible. Each research setting is unique. Learning the context of what is valued and feared and who is able to persuade others will maximize or—if not learned—threaten cooperation.

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