

8 Focus Group Discussions – Teaching Staff

Jorunn H. Midtsundstad

In the project School-In, the aim was to analyse the expectation structures in the school community (chapter 2). We used several methods to answer our research questions, including questionnaires for the teaching staff and students (chapter 10), but we were also interested in the opinions of the teaching staff. One way to obtain data would, of course, be to ask individual teachers to tell us what they perceive to be the main expectations in their schools. However, not all expectations are explicit. The teachers would probably state obvious, formal expectations from laws and regulations. The project School-In, however, sought to explore the kind of expectations that have become a structural part of the school organisation over the years – the *expectation structures*. These are mostly implicit, tacit, and perhaps also inconvenient. There was a need for a method that could make individual, implicit, tacit knowledge of expectation structures explicit through communication. This is why we decided to use focus group interviews with the teaching staff.

Thus, the teaching staff were encouraged to discuss questions relevant to their school and environment in focus group interviews to identify what expectations they had in common and to what extent they differed. By recording focus group interviews in different schools, we were able to conduct comparisons of the expectation structures that came to the forefront through the teaching staff discussions. The qualitative focus group interviews, together with the quantitative teaching staff questionnaires, provided valuable information on the participating schools before and after the innovation and were an essential part of the school mapping.

This chapter shows details about why we chose the method of focus group interviews, the origin and effectiveness of the method, and how we used it in the project School-In. The chapter ends with discussing implications for further research.

8.1 The origin of focus groups

Focus group interviews have been used for different purposes, but generally aim to reveal group opinions on various matters. Social scientists have used focus group interviews since as early as the 1920s. However, the use of focus group interviews has been widespread since the 1950s, when market researchers developed this strategy for consumer motives and product preferences. In the 1980s, this research strategy was adopted by the academic community (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

A focus group usually consists of four to six people, led by a facilitator who conducts a non-governing interview (Creswell, 2014b). The purpose is to get many different views from the group on a specific topic. The group facilitators present the issues to be discussed and facilitate the exchange of opinions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The method has many advantages but also some disadvantages. It efficiently delivers data on collective processes, such as interactions, interpretations, and norms in groups and circumstances where the participants influence, support, or correct each other. Nevertheless, the method is often criticised because of the impossibility of replicating findings and its vulnerability towards ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ voices, hierarchies, and intellectualising processes within a group (Halkier, 2015; Bryman, 2014).

To investigate the expectation structures in the school community, we chose a variant of the method called ‘focus group discussions’ – a concept and methodology used by Bohnsack (2004). This approach differs from ordinary group interviews because of its specific emphasis on the conversation between the participants on the one hand and the researcher’s reticent role throughout the discussion on the other (Bohnsack, 2004). Several researchers underline the organic interaction between participants (Willis, 1977; Willis, Jones, Canaan, & Hurd, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994). Thus, the role of the researcher is ‘... to create the right conditions to make it possible for the structure of the case to unfold according to its own typical rules’ (Bohnsack, 2004, p. 218). Bohnsack states that when a discussion group belongs to ‘*the same milieu or the same interpretative community*’, its structural expressions are ‘*representing their milieu*’ (Bohnsack, 2004, p. 216). This methodological approach made it possible to investigate the expectations of the teaching staff – the group representing their milieu in School-In.

8.2 Bohnsack’s approach to focus groups

Bohnsack refers to the development of the method as a group discussion procedure in Germany, where it emerged as a result of criticism against the isolation of interviewees in questionnaire research (Bohnsack, 2004). In the 1980s, Bohnsack started developing the method both as a methodology for qualitative research and as a method for practical empirical inquiry (Bohnsack, 2004). Originally, it was used in the context of group discussions and for the analysis of talk.

The main goal was to investigate the process character of interaction and conversation, pointing to one crucial aspect – the emergence of *meaning* (Bohnsack, 2004). It was of interest to question the normative rightness, the depictions, and the subject of research that the group’s people took for granted (Mannheim, 1982). The point was to turn from the question of cultural and social facts and focus on how cultural and social realities are accomplished and generated in their social environment (Mannheim, 1952). Therefore, the method allowed asking what is taken for granted as cultural and social facts. ‘In this respect, it is not the content, the “What” of objective meaning that is of predominant importance, but the fact and mode of its existence – the “That”

and the “How” (Mannheim, 1952, p. 67). Mannheim was inspired by constructivism and stated that the world itself is unobservable. He recommended relying on how the ‘world’ or reality is constructed. Bohnsack refers to Niklas Luhmann, who formulated: ‘The questions of “What” are transformed into questions of “How”’ (Luhmann, 2000). Thus, focus group discussions are about the group’s perception of *what* is real and *how* it is real in their context.

The method has been criticised for its limitations in generating hypotheses and, thus, its problems in producing generalisable results. On the other hand, Morley (1998) argues that focus groups deliver satisfactory scientific findings by bringing up other (qualitative) criteria. Bohnsack (2004) uses the focus group approach to point to another understanding of the conversation in the group. He explains that communication consists of orientation structures that process other structures in a homologous fashion in relative independence of the specific topics. What is continuously reproduced in the discussion is recognised as the constitution of the ‘structure of the case’. Bohnsack argues that it must be recognised in the sense of reconstructive methodology. Thus, it depends on how the researcher creates the right conditions to make it possible for the structures of the case to unfold according to its own typical rules. This approach is different from standardised procedures, where replicability of results and, therefore, reliability are questioned.

The method’s empirical background is founded on the understanding that the discussions between people in an organisation represent the same interpreting community. Thus, the discussions follow typical orientation patterns that can be identified and analysed to understand how reality is constructed in a particular organisation. This understanding of the method’s empirical background has implications for how the method is conducted and for the analysis of transcriptions from focus group discussions.

8.2.1 Bohnsack’s principles for group discussions

Bohnsack has formulated eight reflexive principles for the conduct of group discussions, to explain the researchers’ practice: (1) *the entire group is the addressee of interventions*; (2) *suggestions of topics rather than a prescription of propositions*; (3) *demonstrative vagueness*; (4) *no interventions in the allocations of turns*; (5) *generation of detailed representations*; (6) *inherent follow-up questions*; (7) *exherent follow-up questions*; and (8) *the directive phase* (Bohnsack, 2004, p. 219–220). These criteria were emphasised in our study as follows:

First, the interviewer must address the questions to the whole group and not to individuals. The interviewer, or more precisely, the facilitator, must not directly influence the distribution of turns. The questions must be open to prevent ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers and to avoid any influence. The group has to make choices about how and in what direction the discussion will evolve. The questions should also be somewhat vague to invite group interpretations. The facilitator should avoid follow-up questions because these influence the groups’ discussions of the topic. Thus, follow-up ques-

tions should only occur when the conversation grinds to a halt rather than a pause (Bohnsack, 2004). The reticence required of the facilitator of a group discussion allows the participants to conclude on a topic and organise who speaks when and how to take turns independently of the facilitator. The goal is not to insert new topics with follow-up questions but to let the group take the initiative for new framing or issues. At the end of the discussion, the facilitator might refer to contradictions and other notable observations.

These principles for conducting focus group discussions are prerequisites for the analysis of the transcribed interviews as orientation patterns chosen by the group. The reticence required of the leader in a group discussion is also of decisive importance since it enables the understanding of the group as an interpreting community. The point is that the participants should discuss together and understand one another without focusing on understanding the researcher's requests. They should be able to create their patterns of orientation in the discussion. Thus, the researcher can identify the patterns that underlie their communication to unveil their orientation structure in analysing the groups' conversations.

8.2.2 Analysing focus group discussions

In general, when focus group discussions are analysed, the preparations involve making distinctions between different spaces or milieus, particularly those specific to generations, genders, or education (Bohnsack, 2004). These are described as types. In our study, the group consisted of colleagues of teachers and paraprofessionals in the same school representing their milieu. The group can be understood as an *epiphenomenon for the analysis, that gives valid empirical access to the articulation of collective meaning contexts* (Bohnsack, 2004, p. 218). The researcher can interpret the expressions used by the participants as ceremonial or as habits. Thus, they mirror implicit rules, structures, and roles experienced as appropriate in the group. The group is the articulation and representation of a specific milieu. Mannheim's (1952) method utilised this form of sociality to analyse meaning structures. When researchers interpret the orientation structure on behalf of the informants, they carry out what Mannheim (1952) has called 'documental' interpretation. That is, the researcher 'extracts' the conceptual and theoretical explication of the mutual (intuitive) understanding of the subject. Thus, the researcher distinguishes meaning content from the inherent literal meaning by taking account of the discourse process, focusing on the speech turns related to one another (discussion organisation), and identifying the focused metaphors.

Researchers should transcribe and analyse the group discussions to identify collective orientation patterns in the discussions among the participants (Bohnsack 2004). The basic units for the analysis should be (a) *interactions rather than individual action* and (b) *interactions in their social context* (Morley, 1998).

Comparative analyses must concentrate on what becomes a *topic* in the discussion, focusing on how the group treats the topic and in what kind of framework. Comparative analyses can corroborate the orientation framework in a transparent and em-

pirically verifiable way by comparing how different groups deal with the same topic (Bohnsack, 2004). The basic structure is the thematic composition and how the group decodes the typically implicit thematic structure (Bohnsack, 2004). The aim of the reflecting interpretation is the reconstruction of the orientation pattern or framework.

8.3 Use of focus groups in School-In

In our project, the purpose was to explore the expectation structures in school organisations. There was a need for mixed methods in the study design and both quantitative and qualitative approaches to map each school's point of departure and to identify the eventual effects of the innovation. Thus, the design offered the possibility of a triangulation of methods, which is often used to enhance the accuracy of projects (Creswell, 2014a).

For the *data collection process* in School-In, we chose focus group discussions to find out how the teaching staff discussed our questions. This choice was based on the empirical knowledge that those who are bound to one another through a familiar milieu of mutual experience will comprehensively articulate their meanings. We could also expect the discussions of the 4–5 focus groups in each school, consisting of 6–8 teaching staff members, to represent the school's milieu because they were shared 'in one another's presence'. This frame of 'one another's presence' is necessary because the frame is the milieu the group members represent. Thus, how we formed our focus groups was decisive. Because our project focused on the school as a professional learning community and the development of an inclusive school, we wanted groups to be represented by persons from all year levels to inspire the colleagues to discuss their school holistically. We assumed that the discussions would be too narrow for our purpose if, for instance, we grouped them according to subjects or year level.

In conducting the focus group discussions, the facilitator had to take a reticent role. We introduced the focus group discussions by saying that we did not want the group members to primarily answer our questions but to discuss the question at the table. We had prepared ten identical questions for all schools and conducted the interviews during our first visit to each school (pre-interview).

The facilitator had to make sure to change the questions approximately every six minutes to finish within one hour and to guarantee standardisation and that all focus groups were done at about the same time. Accordingly, we presented our questions on the table printed in a large font, ready for the group members to start the discussion. We could say some encouraging words to support the discussion, but follow-up questions were only permitted if the discourse grounded to a halt and momentum needed to be re-established (Bohnsack, 2004). Emphasising the possibility for the group members to discuss in their usual way enabled us to analyse the discussions, focusing on how the group framed our questions. Table 8.1. presents the questions.

Table 8.1: Overview of the focus group questions (pre-post) in School-In

Pre focus group questions	Post focus group questions
1. What characterises the best classes to teach?	1. In what way have your measures contributed to change according to the teaching staff and students?
2. What kind of students make you worry?	2. How do the students notice the measures? How did they respond?
3. What happens when your school gets the results from national tests?	3. How can you continue working on common measures? What do you need to continue with this collaboration?
4. What experience do you have from working with inclusive learning environments?	4. What does the term inclusion mean?
5. How would you characterise the local context of (the place)?	5. What reflections have you made concerning your development area* during the project?
6. How would you characterise students coming from different parts of the municipality?	6. In what ways can the development area* make work at the school easier?
7. What kind of image does the local community have of the school?	7. How can a well-functioning school community increase opportunities for creative and professional development?
8. How would you describe the teaching staff?	8. What motivates collaboration across year levels?
9. What characterises your school culture?	9. What do you think about the teaching staff's efforts in the project School-In?
10. What characterises a good teacher in your school? What does this teacher do?	10. What has come out of the reflections in the group discussions in the project?

*Different schools discussed their experiences from working with their chosen development area

The questions seemed to be perceived as open and easy to discuss for most of the groups. Of course, some groups asked for detailed definitions of some of the concepts, for instance, 'student response' to the measures tried out in the classrooms or the 'place of the school'. We did not answer, asking them to define the concepts themselves.

Because we had little time to prepare the data between the day of data collection and the next school visit, we needed to develop a strategy for providing the school with feedback from the focus group discussions. Thus, we conducted a *screening* by listening to the audiotapes from each focus group and writing down core elements for each question in a table with a column for each group. This allowed us to identify and compare central points of the group discussions for the different groups. It also allowed us to identify commonalities or distinctions across the groups and to communicate the core elements of the discussions to the respective schools at our next visit. These findings from the focus group discussions and other data sources played a central role in the decision on a development area in each school (chapter 4).

We also conducted focus group discussions (post-interview) at the end of the semester to collect data about the development and acceptance of the project after project completion (table 8.1.) in each school. The procedure was identical to that used for the first focus group discussions, with the exception of the different questions.

The *process of analysis* for research purposes started with transcription work performed by the researchers as well as university students participating in the project. We analysed the transcribed group discussions with a view to identifying collective orientation patterns in the reflection among the participants (Bohnsack, 2004; 2013). Thus, the basic units for the analysis were to be (a) interactions rather than individual action; and (b) interactions in their social context (Morley, 1998). Thus, the orientation patterns in different focus group discussions were the focus of the analysis and were used as a comparative approach.

The topic of interest together with the research questions formed the basis for deciding on a methodological approach and on how to analyse the transcripts. One example from our analysis is the article on changes in the reflections from the focus group discussions where we identified and analysed the discussion patterns in different contexts (Ingebrigtsvold Sæbø & Midtsundstad, 2022). In this case, a deductive approach was chosen, relying on the theory of Wackerhausen (2009) to analyse five different identified patterns: (1) first-order reflections – descriptions of how the school's praxis is and how it should be; (2) second-order reflections – critical comments on the staff members' and the school's praxis and reflection on what to do; (3) use of pronouns (you, one or we, I); (4) disagreements and personal statements; (5) references to the members of the school ('your students'/our students'). These patterns gave an impression of the reflection patterns in the different schools. Comparing the patterns before and after the intervention also revealed how the reflection changed in the groups. Focusing on orientation patterns allowed us to analyse and compare the discussions in different schools and to discuss changes in the patterns of reflection.

8.4 Theoretical, methodological, and practical implications

The theoretical background of this method of focus group discussions was essential because of its implications for the methodology. It influenced how we organised the teaching staff in groups, how we conducted and chaired the discussions, and how we analysed the transcriptions. This epistemological coherence was decisive to our qualitative research approach and was essential for us to be able to argue our findings.

Authors using traditional focus group interviews can present and illustrate their findings using quotes from individual group members or present the number of group members that agree to the quotes. Our epistemological approach required a focus on the *discussions* and the *orientation patterns* in the conversation. In order to publish our findings, we had to defend our focus on the discussions themselves; if we wanted to use quotes, they needed to illustrate typical patterns emerging in the discussions. Thus, publishing findings from focus group discussions implies an awareness of the epistemological coherence.

A practical implication for future research is a call to be very clear about how to conduct a focus group discussion, and the challenge for facilitators to abstain from fol-

low-up questions. It is, of course, very difficult for good researchers with professional knowledge and necessary curiosity not to intervene and use follow up questions. As a researcher, it was essential to keep in mind that this was first and foremost about the teaching staff's discussions in *their* milieu, and influencing the data collection would cause a negative impact on the results. In School-In, we profited from adhering to a standardised description of how to conduct the focus group discussions.

The focus groups were not only a necessary part of the research. They were also a good way to initiate productive discussions appreciated by the teaching staff. The participants in some schools even told us that the focus group discussions were the best part of the innovation overall. They told us they appreciated the opportunity to discuss their school and considered the focus groups more like a working method for fostering reflection than a research method. Thus, we emphasise that this was a fruitful and exciting approach, not only for researchers but also for school staff to discuss questions targeting their specific school.

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