When six Somali parents unexpectedly cross our path: Feelings of loyalty and researcher responsibility

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This paper concerns an ethnographic study of bilingual teachers in Norwegian compulsory school. More specifically, it draws on the case of Mohammed who is responsible for the teaching of emergent bilingual pupils from a Somali background at Ullstad lower secondary school. I applied a discursive shadowing approach to gain an insight into Mohammed’s work and collaboration with other teachers. This involved a combination of closely following, ubiquitously recording and continuously reflecting with this key-participant over a period of time.

The paper discusses how this discursive shadowing approach challenged my position at different stages of the study, including feelings of loyalty and researcher responsibility. I focus on observations and recordings of a parent-teacher meeting with three members of staff, including Mohammed who acted as translator between Norwegian and Somali, and six Somali parents, while I sat in a corner of the room and observed and listened in on what was going on. The ”methodical rich point” (Hornberger, 2006) to be discussed in this paper arose when I subsequently gained access to a transcription and translation of the interaction during the meeting. My perception of a positive atmosphere during this meeting was challenged by the translation which reflected the frustrations and sometimes anger which the parents expressed towards the school in Somali, but which Mohammed during the meeting chose not to translate into Norwegian.

In order to deal with this new information, I propose the need for ”a research ethics on the move” (Dewilde, 2013), which is a highly situated ethics that requires the researcher to critically reflect upon ”ethically important moments” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) throughout the study. It will be argued that in a study conducted in a multilingual setting, these ethically important moments may also occur after the material has been collected, transcribed and translated.

Keywords: translation, ethics on the move, Researcher positionality.