


Conducting Focus Groups in Multicultural Educational Contexts: Lessons Learned and Methodological Insights

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Abstract

What happens when focus groups are conducted in challenging situations across languages, cultures, and educational settings? What adjustments might need to be made? How can adaptations be made while still maintaining the integrity of the research? Drawing on a multi-year study of gender and schooling in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, this article brings together researcher data from (1) informal discussion occurring after each focus group between the researchers, (2) reflections and observations from notes written during the research process, and (3) individual reflexivity on the topic of conducting focus groups in multicultural contexts written retrospectively. Using a practical iterative framework, this work adds an important contribution to the qualitative research literature by leading the reader through our processes, considerations, and lessons learned for improving culturally relevant and inclusive focus groups in multicultural educational contexts.

Keywords

ethical inquiry, focus groups, feminist research, social justice, arts based methods, methods in qualitative inquiry

As part of a larger multi-year grant-funded project examining gender in schooling, we sought to examine how gender is enacted within schools throughout post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The study involved multiple stages, including interviews with school leaders, teachers, and as well as qualitative focus groups using arts-based research (see CohenMiller, 2018a; Leavy, 2020) with students in middle school grades, aged 12–15, followed by quantitative surveys distributed across schools. Using specific methodologies and data collection methods in particular contexts such as post-Soviet Kazakhstan forces researchers to adapt to the specific socio-political context of the field that might take additional time and effort.

While the goal of the focus groups was to understand how young students experience gender as related to schooling, this paper focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the researchers themselves when confronted with challenging situations across languages, cultures, and educational settings. In this section, we discuss our experiences as we faced various obstacles and the ways we sought to adjust to these by being unwavering in our goal and moving to a perspective of potential opportunity when faced with challenges.

How Can We Unpack Cultural Nuances in Our Research?

The cultural context of research in Kazakhstan points to both the importance of recognizing current realities and the cultural legacy of the Soviet Union, in which Kazakhstan was subsumed from 1936 to its dissolution in 1991. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been numerous efforts to understand educational transformations in post-Soviet and post-socialist countries. The understanding of educational change brought about theoretical, methodological, and ethical dilemmas to scholars and researchers working in this context as the actualization of democratic structures in post-socialist countries is still hindered by the legacy of the socialist and Soviet ideology (Jonbekova, 2018; Merrill & Whitsel, 2017;

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Silova et al., 2017). Using established methodologies for data collection and analysis such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis could not guarantee exploration of experiences and realities of these complex socio-political contexts (Silova et al., 2017). The capture of Sodiqov, a political science graduate student at the University of Toronto in Tajikistan, posed more complications and concerns for the safety of scholars and researchers working in post-Soviet Central Asia (Janenova, 2019; Niyozov, 2017).

Most often, the harsh political situations of authoritarian states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union forces researchers to be highly dependent on official permissions to conduct research in institutional settings, such as schools and universities (Janenova, 2019; Jonbekova, 2018). In academia, the principle of shared governance and academic freedom was never a part of Soviet universities and is not characteristic of post-Soviet Central Asian universities even now (Valyaeva & DeYoung, 2013). Gaining access to the sites and participants requires preparation of official letters, time, and patience from researchers and “does not guarantee good quality data as the political regime imposes serious limitations on what government officials are allowed to say” (Janenova, 2019, p. 8). In such conditions, completing research involving several methodologies requires significant efforts, and a good understanding of local formal and informal practices. Moreover, it is important to have an awareness of cultural nuances, including, in this case, the context of post-socialist countries, such as post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Within the larger socio-political context, we can move into considering the multicultural context.

How Can We Understand the Multicultural Context We Are Entering?

When we discuss the concept of “multicultural,” there are many ways to unpack that term across identity markers (e.g., ethnicity, race, religion, and gender) for those we are working with, and how we as researchers are positioned in relation to those with whom we are studying.

We use the term multicultural to refer to cultural diversity in schools in which we conducted focus groups as well as the different ways the four authors are positioned in relation to the post-Soviet research context. Kazakhstan’s ethnic and religious landscape is diverse due to multiple conquests of this region, its colonization by Tsarist Russia and Soviet policies of human migration (Gimranova et al., 2021). In 2019, the titular ethnic group, Kazakhs, constituted 68% of the country’s population, followed by Russians (19.3%), Uzbeks (3.2%), Ukrainians (1.5%), Uighurs (1.5%), Tatars (1.1%), Germans (1%), and several other ethnic groups (4.4%) (CIA, 2021). These ethnic differences roughly map onto religious difference, with a majority of Kazakhs and other ethnic groups with Turkic heritage identifying with Sunni Islam (70.2%), while 26.2% of Kazakhstanis identify themselves with Christianity (mainly Russian Orthodox) (CIA, 2021).

The education system responds to these ethnolinguistic differences by allowing schools to use a medium of instruction that caters to the needs of the communities that they serve. In 2017, the majority of schools in the country gave instruction in Kazakh, the national language in the country (3746), followed by schools offering instruction in both Kazakh and Russian languages (2037) and Russian-medium schools (1237). Additionally, 54 schools offered instruction in the native language of other ethnic groups (Uzbek, Uighur, Tajik, Chechen, Azerbaijani, Dungan, Polish, Kurdish, and Turkish) (IAC, 2018, as cited in Gimranova et al., 2021). In addition, to the ethnolinguistic diversity, cultural norms vary across rural and urban settings and the southern regions bordering other Central Asian countries and northern regions bordering Russia. Paying close attention to the contextual plurality, schools were selected from both the southern and northern parts, as well as maintaining diversity based on the medium of instruction and urban and rural locations.

How Does the Multicultural Background of the Researcher’s Impact Research?

The four researchers of this article included all those who went into the field to collect the data, including three faculty researchers (CohenMiller, Durrani, and Kataeva) and a PhD student research assistant (Makhmetova). Both the third author and research assistant spoke Russian fluently or natively. For regions of the country that needed Kazakh language skills, the fourth author and a research assistant spoke the language natively. For the two researchers who did not speak Russian or Kazakh, they only stood out for their difference in language ability but also for their difference in ethnic appearance (i.e., Spanish/American and Pakistani/British). (The ways in which others perceived these differences is a topic we hope to address in future writing).

We worked in teams of two to three researchers, including faculty and a research assistant. Our backgrounds range from Sephardic-American, Pakistani-British, Tajik to Kazakh cultural backgrounds. All four authors had a different relationship to the research context that could not be categorized easily and neatly along the binary of “insider” and “outsider”. All four adult researchers were seen as “outsiders” by our young participants, at least initially, as our age set us apart from them. At the beginning of our interactions, students’ behavior and talk were much guarded in ways that mimicked the age/status hierarchies of the classroom. The arts-based participatory activity was pivotal in minimizing power relations of age and status and bringing home the message that we were not in school to “assess” their knowledge or skills but just to “talk” about everyday life in the school and at home. For example, student participants were engaged in discussion and guided through various arts-based activities to encourage participant voice (CohenMiller, 2018b). Students’ perspectives on gender were to be sought in a student-friendly and creative manner by asking them to draw images of girls and boys in their social

settings. Their images would then be used as a springboard to discuss gender dynamics, including plans for future studies and career choices and the underpinning rationale. The arts-based data produced was not analyzed by the researchers but instead acted as elicitation for discussion in the focus groups and to enhance understanding of student experience. The use of arts along with our multicultural collective backgrounds offered opportunities to better see and unpack the process of researching within multicultural contexts and across team members.

As a Central Asian and an ethnic Kazakh, the third and fourth authors, respectively, were pivotal to data collection in Russian and Kazakh languages. Nevertheless, existing hierarchies based on nationality, race, age, and academic status played to the advantage of the first and the second authors even when both lacked the relevant linguistic competence in the research context. Our (perceived) identities as “White/Western” (first author) and someone senior in age and academic status (second author) were very helpful in negotiating access within schools. Additionally, being a former schoolteacher in a low-income country and having extensive research experience in schools across a range of countries in the Global South were also helpful in developing rapport with research participants. These experiences and backgrounds helped us adapt to changes in the research process based upon the complex, dynamic needs of participants. Finally, none of the authors entered a “foreign” culture to extract data. All three non-Kazakhstani authors have been living and teaching in a university in Kazakhstan for varying durations of time.

How Have Focus Groups Been Used?

Focus groups have been used across disciplines and contexts. Such a research approach aims to bring together multiple views in a common space to discuss an agreed-upon topic. Through welcoming together multiple people in one space, a moderated focus group can encourage participants to have a voice, sharing and building upon one another’s ideas. Often six to twelve people are included in focus groups (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011; Vaughn et al., 1996), although there are also benefits of smaller groups of two (Toner, 2009) and groups of over 20 (Lobe et al., 2020).

Gailing and Naumann (2018) note that using focus groups contributes not only as tools to examine problems or phenomena but also that focus groups are participatory, interactive, and can be transformative for studying energy and society. In business, the use of focus groups has been used for many years to examine consumer preferences, such as through brand awareness (see Cui et al., 2018). In educational fields, focus groups are widely used to understand stakeholder views on a variety of educational topics and experiences (Vaughn et al., 1996). Yet, in certain fields of education, such as in the study abroad research, focus groups have not been used to their full potential (Winke, 2017).

How Can Focus Groups Be Culturally Responsive?

To be culturally responsive, researchers may incorporate a variety of considerations. For example, becoming aware of the cultural context for those involved in the study could mean adapting in language, interaction, and activities used within the focus group. Practical aspects can include, for instance, from ensuring everyone is adequately heard (Sim, 1998), to the ethics of stress within interactions (see Sim & Waterfield, 2019), to the more recent discussion of creating inclusive focus groups (see Trevisan, 2020). Moreover, Holt (2010) suggests the potential of returning to focus group participants for their feedback. By returning to participants, they have an opportunity to confirm that the researchers have captured their voices appropriately.

Within focus groups, there are approaches for incorporating activities, such as having researchers ask participants to write out ideas on a topic. In other cases, the focus group facilitators may encourage discussion through hands-on activities, such as organizing ideas in order of perceived importance (see CohenMiller et al., 2017). As researchers, a key aspect of working across multicultural contexts is considering our lenses of equity, inclusion, and social justice (see CohenMiller & Boivin, 2022a; Romm, 2015).

In multicultural contexts, considering language use is critical (see Bancroft, 2015; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018). Other relevant topics for conducting focus groups include considerations such as moving to online research (see Lobe et al., 2020; Morgan & Lobe, 2011), identifying the “spectrum of insider-outsiderness” (CohenMiller & Boivin, 2022b, p.74), and implementing culturally responsive practices (Rodriguez et al., 2011). For example, as suggested by Rodriguez et al. (2011), each focus group discussion in the current study included a small number of students whose voices were captured in a “pre-existing or freely formed naturally occurring group” (p. 408). These were organized based on grade, that is, separate groups for seventh and eighth grade and in mixed-gender settings (when available) as classrooms are also organized as so in the research context. Following the hierarchical process of negotiating access was also to adhere to local sensibilities and avoid difficulties for school principals and teachers. Allowing research participants to take photographs with us is another example that students eagerly requested, even though one may argue it could potentially risk their anonymity. The pairing of an outsider (having greater racial, national, age or professional status, greater experience of doing research with young people) with an insider (less experience in doing research involving children, relatively younger and hence a lower social status in Kazakhstan) although strategic, could also be seen as part of culturally responsive research.

There is also attention to culturally competent care of researchers during focus groups, such as focusing on the importance of conducting culturally tailored focus groups.

Considerations including recognizing the cultural norms of participants and research contexts are particularly relevant, including addressing the language and culture of multicultural researchers as facilitators in focus groups (see [Cedeño et al., 2020](#); [Karwalajtys et al., 2010](#))

In contexts where researchers from the Global North are conducting focus groups in cultural competence is foundational, particularly relevant to social science research ([Hennink, 2007](#)). [Hennink's \(2007\)](#) book on focus groups relating to the Global South provides illustrative cases of conducting "international focus groups." Yet, [Jakobsen \(2010\)](#) critiqued the book for addressing only logistical questions as "translation and recruitment procedures, applying for research permits, and seating and recording arrangements" (p. 74), and lacking engagement with methodological challenges as analysis and discussion of focus groups. Moreover, further issues of power hierarchies remain as reflected in the term "developing" countries. By being a multicultural research team, we were afforded an opportunity to view the research in ways that potentially enhanced our ability to create a culturally responsive research experience for our youth participants, such as suggested by [Rodriguez et al. \(2011\)](#).

The specifics for how to create focus groups within multicultural contexts could use more attention. How our power and privilege are suggested to others can affect the level of trust ([CohenMiller & Boivin, 2022c](#)). When working with youth, how adults are positioned plays an important role. There are a few suggested ways in which to build trust with youth, such as through youth participatory action research (YPAR) (see [Carl & Ravitch, 2021](#)) and in transformative research (see [Mertens, 2020](#)). In the transformative paradigm, social justice is embedded throughout.

For example, using a transformative research lens to facilitate balancing power in focus groups could lead towards training youth to conduct the groups instead of adults leading the discussions. Youth participants may consider a focus group facilitator who is of a similar age or background an insider to the group. The participants could have a chance to see themselves reflected in the process. In such contexts, youth facilitators or researchers offer shared language and mutual understandings, establishing a relaxed environment for discussing potentially sensitive topics such as gender or sexuality ([Dunne et al., 2015](#)). Nevertheless, power hierarchies do not simply dismantle in conducting participatory youth research. As there are multiple identity markers at play in the research encounter, it is highly problematic to privilege age over all other identity markers to justify the engagement of youth as peer researchers ([Dunne et al., 2015](#)).

Power operates not only between adult researchers and young people but also between youth facilitators of focus groups and their young peers resulting in power asymmetries around gender, ethnicity, class, or other characteristics, negatively impacting the democratic participation of the diverse young population ([Dunne et al., 2015](#)). In a study using youth-led focus groups in three countries in the Global South, [Dunne](#)

[et al. \(2015\)](#) found youth researchers engaging in arguments with youth participants when their perspectives differed markedly or used derogatory language for youth participants who belonged to marginal ethnic groups. Power hierarchies based on gender also became apparent, with male youth facilitators often dismissing and undermining the female youth facilitator.

With youth, focus groups can also provide opportunities for young people to demonstrate their understanding of experiences, especially when special considerations of power are attended to. For instance, one of the authors ([Crossouard et al., 2020](#)) conducted segregated focus groups based on gender and religion in their study of Muslim youth identity formation to offer participating youth greater freedom to discuss sensitive issues related to gender relations in contexts where gender- and faith-based hierarchies existed.

Another way to encourage voice for young people is through hands-on activities. The use, for instance, of embedding arts into focus groups can be effective in multicultural contexts, including for young participants. For example, [Guruge et al. \(2015\)](#) found that in working with refugee and migrant youth, the use of arts provided a means to understand shifting roles and responsibilities. In our study of school students, we incorporated arts-based research including drawing as part of hands-on activities to encourage middle schoolers to share their thoughts about schooling and being a boy or a girl (a binary divide as is appropriate for the context).

How Does New Understanding from Fieldwork Develop Ethically?

We collected three sets of data relating to our experiences as researchers. First, informal discussion occurred after each focus group between the researchers. The lead author took notes following the informal discussion to aid in future reflection and analysis. Second, we collected reflections and observations from notes written by individual researchers during fieldwork. And third, we collected individually produced reflexive narratives on the topic of conducting focus groups in multicultural contexts, written retrospectively, as a reflective exercise. As such, in an iterative process, we incorporated reflexivity to learn about ourselves ([Goldblatt & Band-Winterstein, 2016](#)).

All researchers and research assistants who were involved in the fieldwork knew that the discussions could be the subject of a publication. For this article, all those involved in the fieldwork are also co-authors. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic and the vulnerable nature of the population (children), we also include here a few points about the ethical steps taken for the original study. Ethical procedures followed Institutional Review Board approval for the original study, such as including prior permissions to access the school grounds, informed consent for all those involved (e.g., school authorities, teachers, students, and parental permission), translation of all materials from English to Russian and

Kazakh. Data was stored in our University's Google Team Drive, accessible only to the research team. Analysis was conducted using pseudonyms. The key connecting pseudonyms to full names was kept on a privately owned file by the primary investigators. All identifying information that could reveal the individual participant was removed for all reporting purposes. Data were combined to provide a composite understanding of the information. Lastly, at the conclusion of the research, data sets were downloaded and stored on password-protected private computers of the primary investigators for a minimum of 3 years.

How Can We Unpack Insights from the Data?

We sought to employ the practical iterative framework for qualitative research as suggested by [Srivastava and Hopwood \(2009\)](#), using reflexive iteration: "Reflexive iteration is at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings" (p. 77). To follow the framework, we used the proposed three guiding questions in analyzing the data, "What are the data telling me?... What is it I want to know?... What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?" ([Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009](#), p. 78).

In gathering the data, the lead author started by reviewing the meeting notes, reflections, and observational notes from the research team. This stage involved removing data which did not relate to the focus groups. Through the process, the researcher began a journey into remembering the original study, conversations, and spaces where the team met to debrief formally and informally about collecting focus group discussions, writing down any additional emerging points discussed during the process that may have been missing. Then, the team of researchers who had collected focus group data were requested to individually reflect on the process:

- steps taken to establish inclusive, safe, and encouraging spaces for participants,
- challenges faced,
- suggestions for improvements in creating culturally relevant and inclusive spaces for youth in focus groups in multicultural contexts.

From across the reflections, the texts were analyzed line-by-line using within and across the data. These steps provided a means to increase a consistent understanding and reliability in qualitative research across texts ([Elliott, 2018](#)). We were interested to see patterns in researcher experience and perspective. The first author noted common themes which were then brought back to the team and adjustments shared at an international conference, allowing for further refinement to clarify the findings.

How Can Reflection and Reflexivity Be Used in Understanding the Topic?

We distinguish between reflection and reflexivity, seeing the value in both for these. Reflection offers a chance to look back upon one's experience. As [Freda and Esposito \(2017\)](#) note, it is a form of engaging in introspection. However, without also considering the socio-cultural context and relationships, reflection can situate a researcher as separate from or even in opposition to others ([Pillow, 2003](#)). Drawing from [Freda and Esposito \(2017\)](#), [Smith and Luke \(2021\)](#) note how reflexivity builds upon reflection to connect with the context and researcher relationships: "reflexivity demands researchers situate themselves within the social and contextual aspect of their study, while openly exploring the self, others, and relationships as the field work proceeds" (p. 165).

As shown effective in conducting focus groups, [Karwalajtyś et al. \(2010\)](#) used researcher reflections and debriefing, which we used throughout our processes to both gain a better understanding of the focus groups and our methodological approaches. Moreover, memo writing was integrated throughout the research process, and reflexive notes developed during the research and reflections after the data collection were shared with the lead author for the initial identification of themes. The challenges faced within the focus group with students did not require extreme changes and adjustments but instead often involved multiple minor changes.

For instance, after the first team returned from the field, they were able to offer insight about adaptations to the process of receiving parental consent. Parents instead of signing a consent form were sending research approval of their child to take part in the study through a WhatsApp text message. Insisting on signing the consent form would not have been culturally relevant or responsive. People do not add an electronic signature in this context. The majority of households do not have printers. Thus, insisting parents send a signed permission sheet would have caused distress and financial burden of getting the sheet printed, signing it, scanning it, and emailing it. This would have in practice excluded children from marginalized backgrounds who neither have the time or material resources to satisfy ethical regulations developed in the Global North.

Across the reflective notes and reflections shared by the researchers, what emerged was a purposeful focus on intent. For instance, the purposeful intent to create shared spaces with young people to allow for discussion and confidence in sharing personal experiences. Such an emphasis can be seen in team member meetings with the full team. As would be expected, the research lead, a feminist educator, provided a forum in meeting with faculty and research assistants that allowed for all voices to be heard. In this way, she embodied principles of feminist and collaborative research practices.

Thinking back on our meetings, we met first in a small room at our university to discuss the process of interviewing and focus groups. We discussed our ideas about the best ways

forward and shared our understanding of the local context. For some, going into the public schools was a reminder of their own schooling in the country or region. For others, their experience drew from prior research in working with the schools. One goal in meeting was to collectively bring together these experiences to better prepare for entering the local schools in the city and in rural areas. Each team went to the field at staggered times, which allowed for an iterative process of returning to the full team to debrief and consider solutions for challenges. We discussed our experiences of going into the field, such as in the following:

I went into the field in Central Kazakhstan with my colleague Zhadyra. We went to a few different schools. Some of the schools were Russian speaking primarily, while some were Kazakh speaking; some within the city, and another within a rural area. In advance of arriving at the site, we had contacted the schools, talked to educators, leaders, and arranged for conducting focus groups with children in middle school. We had sent out consent forms, followed up through email and phone calls. And when we arrived, we were greeted with open arms, and at the same time with educators and leaders and staff who were tremendously busy and overworked. (Reflective notes, CohenMiller)

By contrast, the team undertaking research in southern Kazakhstan was denied access on the scheduled date. The second and third authors arrived in the southern city late evening after a two-hour flight. Early morning, they visited an urban school for data collection as agreed upon and negotiated with the school deputy director (vice-principal or deputy headteacher).

We arrived at 8:45 am. The director (principal) is not in yet. We talked to a deputy director and explained who we are and what we want to do, our plan. She didn't know about our arrival but appeared very open and forthcoming. We were asked to wait for the director ... We talked to the male deputy director who spoke to us in English and explained the purpose of our visit and research. He agrees to participate in the study after we have spoken to the director. We waited for half an hour for the director to see us ... She did not allow us to talk to the teachers. She insisted we could talk to students and teachers tomorrow after she had collected and talked to them. (Reflective notes, Durrani)

Having declined access despite a prior agreement, the researchers decided to visit the remaining schools to touch base with gatekeepers and confirm the schedule with the school directors in person rather than a telephone call or email. The second school was also located in the city. We spent half an hour with the school director, explaining our purpose and processes of data collection. The director confirmed the fieldwork schedule and nominated a deputy director to coordinate our visit and interactions with teachers and students. It took us a two-hour drive to arrive at the rural school. Even when the school was not expecting a visit from us, we were treated very hospitably by the director.

We were introduced to the whole admin team. Although we had not scheduled data collection on that day and our purpose was

merely to discuss the ethical and research processes, the director permitted us to negotiate ethical processes with deputy directors. Following consent processes, we interviewed three deputy directors. (Reflective notes, Durrani)

Across the team we also discussed the obstacles we faced, where each had to find a way forward to complete data collection. For example, what happens when researchers arrive to conduct focus groups in a quiet, separate space and no such place is available? The focus group protocol we had developed involved beginning with an ice breaker game that would involve movement around the room. The game, termed "Girls like, boys like, kids like," involved creating a large Venn diagram on a poster board, with large overlapping circles—"Boys Like," "Girls Like." Starting with asking what boys like to do, students would write on post-Its and walk over to the large poster to put their responses on the appropriate circle. Then students would be asked to brainstorm some things that girls like to do with responses on large post-Its as well and walking over to add them to the poster board. And if students said at any point "But a boy/girl can like that too," they could be directed to put it in the middle of the overlapping circles. However, after the first team returned from the field, they shared insights about the use of finding appropriate spaces to conduct the study and the adaptations needed to adjust the activities and discussions.

The following reflects on this instance:

In one scenario we showed up at the school and the plan was for the focus group to be conducted within one of the classrooms. When we were led to the classroom there was a class that was in session. So, we were then led to a new area, we looked for space in the staff room, but teachers were already in there. Ultimately, we found space within another room, with a new section of that room. The space contained chairs and tables stacked on top of each other, perhaps it was a storage space or closet used for the school. The administrator helped to rearrange the space allowing a group of four young students to fit behind a table while me and my research assistant sat on the other. We're on the other side. Our plan to have the children be able to get up and move around, to move post-Its to different areas of the room to indicate their preferences and thoughts about being a boy or girl in the school, had to be adjusted. (Reflective notes, CohenMiller)

The initial plan in our research was to have students move around the room as part of the focus group was no longer possible. Instead, because of the size of the space, students were stuck behind a large table. Thus, what do we do as researchers when the physical space is not available to conduct the study as planned? For some, this type of challenge in fieldwork may appear commonplace. Various options, for instance, could have included: returning at another time when a larger space would be available, reducing the size of the focus groups to pairs, a potential for focus group research (see [Morgan, 2010](#)), which could have allowed a different

Table 1. Enhancing Focus Group Research in Multicultural Contexts: Recommendations Gained From Lessons Learned.

Topic	Questions to Ask Yourself as a Researcher
Creating a mindset of potential opportunity (CohenMiller et al.,2020)	When confronted with a challenge, how can I reframe it to think of it as an opportunity? How can I consider the process as a learning opportunity to improve the research?
Becoming aware of expectations	What am I expecting to encounter when entering the field? Where do I think the context will vary from my expectations? Who can I talk with to reconcile potential differences in thought or paradoxes of experience?
Purposeful integration of researcher reflexivity across the team	Where can we incorporate researcher team reflexivity at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the study? What steps do we need to take to ensure all researchers have a chance to voice their experiences and provide insights on next steps and potential adjustments in the research processes?

configuration of the room and for the students to be able to move around.

However, for emerging researchers, such an obstacle could be seen as a failure, which is why it is important to remind ourselves to be “unwavering” in our purpose of the research and reframe potential failure as a potential opportunity (CohenMiller et al., 2020). As such, we decided to move forward in the research but in an adjusted manner. Ultimately, we decided to adjust the activity itself to be responsive to the needs of the community at that moment. This meant that as facilitators in the focus group, we interacted with the students in a different way, by asking them where to place the post-Its and having them pass each one to us. In this way, we adjusted for “participant needs and unpredictable events” (CohenMiller et al., 2020, p. 5). The data were collected, and participants were able to voice their experiences.

Yet, there remains a question as to whether the chosen adjustment affected the data collection. In critically reflecting on our decision in qualitative research (CohenMiller & Boivin, 2022a), we can consider how our research facilitated participant’s voice or hindered it. Moreover, the adapted activity meant that students were more physically constrained. Could this have affected what they shared? Perhaps, would the student participants have been more open in what they wrote on the Post-Its, if they didn’t have to pass them to the facilitators? These are questions that remain unanswered and the type of questions to keep in mind for future studies. By moving forward in our research on the day and time agreed upon, with the exact number of participants determined, we sought to be culturally responsive and inclusive of participants (and the space) available on that day.

In conducting research in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, for those of us from other areas of the world, we were outsiders to the context. Whereas for those from the region, their reflexive notes pointed to how their views as insiders may have affected how they viewed the data collection:

Some things might look “normal” to me being from a post-Soviet context but might look different to someone who is not from this context...Using qualitative research in post-Soviet contexts has

its own challenges. As sociology and especially gender studies were not part of the scholarship during Soviet times, teachers and school leaders are not familiarized with qualitative methodology. It usually takes time to explain the purpose of research. In addition, it is important to gain trust from the participant so as not to be considered “spies” because some of the questions might look “strange” to the participants. Thus, it is imperative to explain research, ethical procedures, and confidentiality procedures are followed. (Reflective notes, Kataeva)

In practice, helping participants see that our research would not broadcast their discussion to others meant multiple steps. Often this meant extending our time at a site to spend additional time within the site to help demonstrate our commitment to being present. For example, at one rural site, young students after a focus group wanted to spend time talking to the researchers and taking photographs with us. They also asked us about our personal and professional experiences, where we are from, about our university, and how they can be future students at our university. While this additional time was not incorporated into the original design, the minor adaptation appeared to show students that we cared about their interests. Such adjustments can be considered part of being culturally responsive, allowing for flexibility while focusing on the goal of the study.

What Can We Learn from Our Experiences? Lessons Learned and Methodological Insights

We faced challenges across the original research study that we identified through this study’s processes of reflection, debriefing, and discussion. For example, the length of time it takes to translate from participants to principal investigator created long pauses in the discussion which changed the nature of a free-flowing conversation within one language. Moreover, at times students wanted to practice their English, showing their capabilities to the researchers proudly. However, this meant that the students’ ability to express their thoughts were often more limited based upon their language

ability, which was not yet fluent in English. Additionally, there was then a required step in translation to translate the student's English response to Russian or Kazakh for the other participants. Other challenges included findings and adjusting to the spaces provided or available for conducting focus group research. And lastly, navigating how we were seen as insiders and outsiders continued throughout the study to both afford chances to interact (e.g., students wanted to share with the "foreign" researchers) and obstacles.

In addition to seeing the challenges, we also were able to explore potential steps to improve the creation of culturally relevant focus groups in multicultural educational contexts (see Table 1). Through the collective understanding across research team members, we were able to identify methodological lessons learned, leading toward recommendations.

As such, in conducting focus groups in multicultural educational contexts that are aiming to be culturally relevant, we recommend starting from a mindset of potential, integrating a perspective that challenges will emerge and that they can be reframed as opportunities. Then, we saw the essential nature of taking time to discuss our own culturally situated expectations. Yet, there will always be continuing challenges, especially regarding cultural differences. One way we have found useful to address these has been through critical self-reflective questions such as in the recommendations from lessons learned or in follow-up questions: We can ask ourselves, *what expectations am I bringing into the study? What am I expecting as a "private space" for conducting the study? How does my upbringing and cultural context inform how I might be tempted to respond or react to being confronted with different experiences than expected?* Lastly, we saw the critical nature of integrating time throughout the research process for time to for researcher reflexivity and debriefing (e.g., did all participants participate equally?) to adapt as needed to the various contexts and situations encountered.

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