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Article

The Scholar-Practitioner within: Reflexivity, Positionality, and the Productive Tensions of Insider Research in TVET Leadership Inquiry

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Abstract: This article is a methodological reflection on a doctoral qualitative study of instructional leadership and graduation outcomes in public TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) brigade centres in Southern Botswana. I conducted the study while serving as a principal in the same system. Rather than treating insider status as a bias to disclose and set aside, I develop productive positionality. This is a reading in which interpretive insight and confirmatory risk are not opposed quantities to trade off. They are the same closeness seen from two sides, held in tension rather than resolved. The central argument is that a reflexive safeguard earns credibility only when a specific, retrievable record shows it changed an interpretation. Merely reporting that a safeguard was used is performative rather than substantive reflexivity. I examine four safeguards against this standard, and against a relational standard drawn from Chilisa's African ontology. That second standard asks whether the resulting account stays accountable to the centres it describes. Only one safeguard, the cross-case analytical protocol, meets the evidentiary standard in a way I can substantiate. The other three do not, and I name that shortfall directly rather than conceal it. This partial result is the article's primary contribution. It shows the distance between practising reflexivity and proving it later, which most positionality writing leaves unexamined. The analysis also distinguishes substantive from performative reflexivity and offers guidance for scholar-practitioners in TVET and similarly regulated systems. Both are offered as one worked case rather than a validated model.

Keywords: Insider Research; Reflexivity; Positionality; Scholar-Practitioner; TVET Leadership; Botswana

1. Introduction

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is never a neutral instrument. This is now a foundational claim across interpretive, constructivist and critical traditions [1–3], and it carries particular force when researcher and participants share the same professional world. When a principal studies other principals, or a teacher studies teachers, the implications are not resolved by a brief positionality statement at the front of a methodology chapter. They run through the whole research process, from how questions are framed to how findings are written up, and they deserve sustained attention.

This article offers that attention, as a methodological reflection rather than a theoretical paper. It reflects on the reflexive dimensions of my doctoral study of instructional leadership among brigade principals and its perceived contribution to graduation rates in Southern Botswana [4], conducted within Botswana's public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, specifically the government-managed brigade centres under the Department of Skills Development. I was not an external observer of this system. I was, and remain, a serving principal within it, having worked as a lecturer and deputy principal across a career of more than two decades in the same institutional landscape I later studied.

What follows is not a simple account of positionality as risk management, a list of biases identified and neutralised. It works through a more careful reading of insider status, building on Holmes's [5] account of positionality as an active stance rather than a fixed identity to disclose, and on Soedirgo and Glas's [6] related proposal of active reflexivity as an ongoing disposition rather than a one-time statement. This reading, which I call productive positionality, treats insider status as a genuine source of insight that outsider researchers cannot easily access, while holding that resource in tension with the confirmatory risks it introduces.

The article joins a growing body of scholarship on reflexivity and positionality [3,6–9] and African relational traditions of knowledge production [10–12]. It extends that conversation into TVET leadership research in Sub-Saharan Africa, a domain that remains comparatively underexplored.

Stated directly, the gap this article addresses is that existing reflexivity scholarship offers a stance to disclose [5], strategies to practise [6], or a standard for judging whether reflexivity was substantive rather than performed [8], but no source combines the three and tests the result against a single, documented case. This article supplies that missing test case, and its primary contribution lies in what the test yields. It is an account that reports honestly that its evidentiary standard is met for one safeguard but not for the other three. Its further conceptual and practical contributions are set out in Section 8, and all are offered as one worked case rather than a validated theory.

2. The Researcher and the Field: A Situated Account

The study behind this article was a doctoral study in Educational Management submitted to the University of South Africa (UNISA). It asked how the instructional leadership practices of brigade principals influenced graduation outcomes in Southern Botswana, as perceived by principals and lecturers. Data came from semi-structured interviews with four principals and 14 lecturers across five public brigade centres, supported by documentary analysis of institutional records. The design was qualitative, interpretivist and multiple-case, and I analysed the data thematically.

Botswana's brigade system occupies a specific institutional niche: originally community-based vocational training centres, later converted into government-managed, certificate-offering colleges. Brigades now operate at National Credit and Qualifications Framework (NCQF) levels 3 to 5 and are accredited by the Botswana Qualifications Authority (BQA), both regulatory features that shaped how I could probe institutional practice in interviews, discussed in Section 4.3.

One feature of this institutional context requires clarification because it recurs below. BQA accreditation operates differently for a programme than for an individual assessor, a distinction that resurfaces at several points in the analysis. This institutional detail, like the history and appointment structure already described, is not background colour. It is the specific terrain that made insider knowledge useful in the ways this article describes, terrain an outside researcher would otherwise have had to reconstruct step by step.

Principals are appointed under a scheme of service that has historically favoured technical qualifications over formal preparation in educational management. This appointment structure is itself a finding of the study. Principals appear to be under-prepared for instructional leadership. I know this not only from the data but from experience. I was appointed as a principal under the same scheme the study critiques.

This overlap between researcher and subject was not coincidental. The study grew from my own observation, as a practitioner, that instructional leadership was rarely treated as a systematic driver of graduation outcomes. In planning meetings, institutional evaluations and the way principals spoke about their own roles, leadership was usually framed in administrative terms rather than as a pedagogical force.

The doctoral inquiry set out to test this observation empirically. But that motivation, the conviction that instructional leadership matters and is undervalued, is exactly the kind of prior belief qualitative methodology asks a researcher to examine rather than let drive interpretation. It is the starting point for the reflection that follows.

3. Theoretical Terrain: Insider Research, Productive Positionality, and African Epistemic Conditions

3.1. The Insider/Outsider Binary and Its Discontents

The distinction between insider and outsider research has a long methodological history, though its most useful treatments are the ones that question the binary itself [9,13–15]. In its simplest form, the distinction holds that insiders, researchers who share institutional, cultural or professional membership with their participants, bring access and depth but risk subjectivity, while outsiders bring detachment but risk superficiality. In practice, this binary dissolves under scrutiny. Researchers move between insider and outsider positions during fieldwork [9], and shared membership does not guarantee shared understanding. These positions can shift within a single study, as reflexive accounts of insider-outsider negotiation show [16,17]. Two principals in the same national system can read their institutional realities very differently, and professional similarity between researcher and participant brings its own risk: assuming one already knows what the participant means.

In this study I was an insider in at least three senses: institutionally, as an employee of the system under investigation; professionally, holding the same principal role as four participants; and experientially, having navigated the same qualification frameworks, accreditation requirements and resource constraints participants described. Each dimension of insider status worked differently and cannot be reduced to a single positionality statement.

Institutional insiderness brought access and legitimacy. Participants were candid in ways that might not have been possible with a researcher perceived as an outside evaluator. Professional insiderness sharpened the interview questions: knowing what a scheme of work looks like in a brigade, or what BQA's accreditation cycle demands of a principal, made specific probes possible that surface familiarity would not. Experiential insiderness carried the biggest risk. It made me quick to recognise and validate accounts that mirrored my own experience, and less alert to the significance of experiences I had not shared.

3.2. Productive Positionality as an Epistemological Resource

Holmes [5] describes positionality as the stance a researcher adopts toward a project and its social and political context. This is a useful definition because it treats positionality as active rather than passive: something a researcher brings to an inquiry and uses, not something they simply are. A researcher who treats positionality as a static disclosure, such as a brief statement of professional role at the start of a methodology section, has performed the surface form of reflexivity rather than practised it [8]. What I call productive positionality here is the ongoing examination of how that stance shapes the questions asked, the evidence weighted and the conclusions drawn.

The key terms in this argument are coined here and require clarification. Productive positionality, substantive reflexivity, and performative reflexivity are my labels, not the cited authors'. Their genealogy is straightforward. Holmes [5] treats positionality as a stance to adopt and disclose but stops at disclosure. Soedirgo and Glas [6] recast it as an ongoing practice with identifiable strategies but do not say how one would know a strategy had worked. Sibbald et al. [8] supply that missing test by separating reflexivity practised from reflexivity merely claimed, but keep the argument general. Productive positionality takes the active stance from the first, the strategies from the second, and the evidentiary test from the third, then adds the claim that distinguishes it from all three.

Where existing accounts treat insider insight and confirmatory bias as opposing forces, productive positionality treats them as two sides of the same condition. The implication is that insider research cannot simply maximise access while minimising bias. Both arise from the same closeness, so reflexivity requires that closeness to be recognised and continually examined. The closeness that let me read a vacant deputy-principal post as a structural pattern is the very closeness that tempted me to over-identify with the principal describing it. Because insight and risk share one source, no procedure separates them; they can only be held in tension and tracked. That is the conceptual move the rest of the article tests, and Sections 5 and 6 are the test, shortfalls included. Recent guidance for novice researchers, such as Goundar [18], still treats positionality as something to declare in a thesis introduction; the discipline attempted here, following Sibbald et al. [8], asks considerably more than disclosure.

The productive dimensions of positionality were evident in three places. In interview design, questions about instructional leadership could be framed around the brigade context, its andragogical orientation, its industry-facing curriculum, its BQA compliance demands, in ways an externally designed instrument would need extensive piloting to achieve. In data interpretation, when a participant described managing a vacant deputy principal post while still trying to sustain classroom monitoring, I could read this as a systemic pattern with structural causes, not just a reported difficulty. In document analysis, institutional records such as lesson observation forms, performance data and accreditation reports were legible as artefacts whose gaps carried meaning, not only as documents to code. The absence of documented lesson observation reports in three of the five cases, for instance, read as a leadership gap rather than an administrative oversight, a reading that required contextual familiarity to make.

3.3. Confirmatory Risk and the Limits of Familiarity

Against these productive dimensions sat a genuine risk of confirmatory bias, one that needed to be held in tension rather than resolved through procedure. In insider research, confirmatory bias is the tendency to read ambiguous data in ways that match the researcher's prior beliefs. In a study of instructional leadership, where I hold normative views about good leadership formed over two decades of practice, this risk is not trivial. It shows up not only in the obvious direction of validating what one already believes, but in subtler forms too: weighting accounts that resonate with personal experience more heavily, reading staff resistance as a management deficit rather than a rational response to specific conditions, or linking improved graduation rates to leadership without enough humility about other explanations.

I carried one particular risk: over-identification with the principal participants. All four principals interviewed faced constraints I have personally encountered, including administrative overload, absent deputy principals, limited procurement autonomy and staff resistance. The risk of reading their accounts through shared professional experience, and softening the analysis as a result, was real and needed active counterwork. Trundle et al. [7] argue that insider and outsider status are not fixed identities but are negotiated between researcher and participant, involving degrees and shifts rather than a fixed line. In this study I was professionally close to the principals but more distant from the lecturers, for whom I carried a degree of formal authority even when it was not directly exercised. Managing this uneven positionality called for different reflexive strategies in different parts of the analysis, discussed in Section 5, and echoes fieldwork dilemmas documented elsewhere in participatory research [19]. Rinchen, Banham and Pelden [20] describe something similar: positionality becomes harder to track precisely where researcher and participant already belong to the same close-knit professional world, which was exactly the condition here with the principal participants.

This authority effect is worth pausing on rather than noting in passing. I held no formal supervisory authority over lecturers at any of the five case-study centres, since none was my own institution. But I held the same rank as their own principals nationally, and lecturers had every reason to suspect that a critical account of their institution's leadership might, in a system as small as Botswana's, eventually reach someone who knew them.

Principals, by contrast, were speaking to a peer, so they did not experience the same asymmetry. Two effects seem plausible here, and I cannot distinguish between them in the available data. Some lecturers may well have softened criticism of their own principal out of caution, producing rosier accounts than an anonymous survey might have drawn out. Others may have spoken more freely than they otherwise would have, trusting the anonymisation and the explicit framing of the study as academic rather than evaluative, and perhaps reassured that the researcher asking the questions already understood the constraints they were describing. Member checking, discussed in Section 5.2, was built to confirm descriptive accuracy, not to catch an effect like this one, and I have no safeguard in this study that was designed for the purpose. It is a limitation the design simply did not anticipate rather than one it managed to resolve.

3.4. African Epistemic Conditions and Relational Accountability

Most methodological writing on insider research has developed within Western academic traditions, and its treatment of knowledge production in Sub-Saharan African institutional contexts remains thin, though not absent. A small but growing body of African insider-reflexivity scholarship exists: Tshuma [21] on insider vulnerability in South African higher education research, Bukamal [15] on cross-cultural insider-outsider positioning, Majola, Geduld and Sathorar [22] on insider-participant positioning in South African TVET curriculum research, and Muasya [23] on the practical experience of insider status during doctoral fieldwork in a Kenyan public university. Niati [24] adds a cross-cultural account of fluid insider-outsider positionality in West African fieldwork. None addresses the specific configuration here: a principal researching the instructional leadership of a system defined by its own qualifications framework, appointment scheme and accreditation regime, where the researcher's own career is implicated in what is being studied. It is this narrower gap, not a broader absence of African reflexive scholarship that this article speaks to.

African epistemic conditions were not peripheral to this reflexive account; they shaped it. Chilisa [10] argues that indigenous and African research paradigms rest on a relational ontology: knowledge is produced not by an individual examining an object but through relationships between researcher, participants, community and institution.

This reshapes what insider research means. My insider position became not only an epistemological advantage or risk, but a form of accountability to the community the knowledge is drawn from and returned to.

Western reflexivity scholarship often underplays this dimension. Berger [3] and Mercer [13] address shared membership without asking what it means where a researcher's legitimacy rests partly on community belonging rather than institutional credentials alone. In Botswana's brigade system, my role as a serving principal was more than professional familiarity; it carried a degree of social accountability, an obligation to ensure the knowledge produced serves the community it was drawn from. Waghid [11] raises related concerns about democratic deliberation in African higher education, and Msila [12] treats Ubuntu's relational ethic, the idea that the self is constituted through relationships with others, as a standing consideration for African institutional research. Read together, these perspectives suggest that the researcher's insider position is a relational condition, not just a biographical fact to disclose. It shapes how participants are engaged, how their voices are represented, and what the researcher owes them beyond informed consent and anonymity. **Figure 1** sets this relational dimension alongside the more familiar language of epistemic risk.

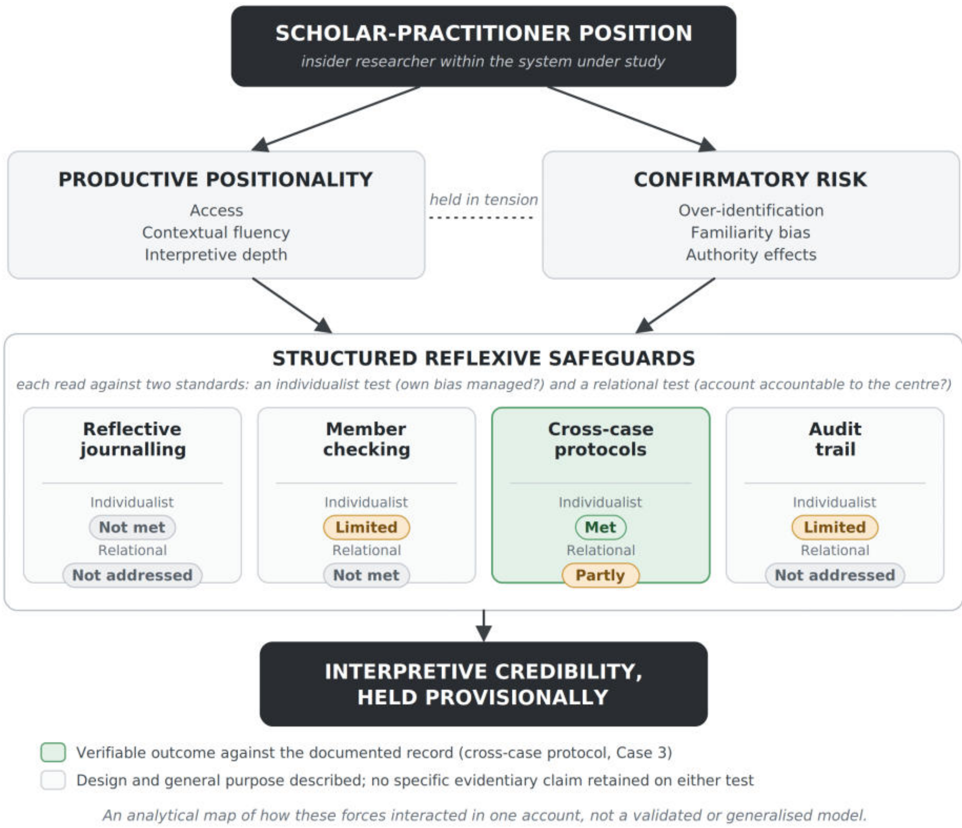

Figure 1. How positionality, risk, and safeguards interacted in this study (an analytical map of this single case, not a validated model).

Put these two literatures side by side and something more than addition happens; each corrects a blind spot in the other. Western reflexivity scholarship, Holmes [5] and Soedirgo and Glas [6] among them, treats positionality as belonging to the individual researcher: something one adopts, discloses, or practises. Chilisa [10] shifts the unit of analysis away from the researcher and onto the relationship itself, and that shift matters practically.

A safeguard can satisfy the individualist standard, showing that I managed my own bias, while still failing a relational one, which would ask whether the knowledge produced remains accountable to the community it describes. Take the cross-case analytical protocols discussed in Section 5.3. They address confirmatory bias in the Western sense, by grounding every claim in evidence, but they say nothing about whether the participating centres would recognise the resulting account as one that actually served them, which is closer to the test Chilisa's framework implies. I do not resolve that second test here. What I can do is flag where the two standards pull apart, most clearly in

Section 5, and treat the relational one as a further burden the safeguards described there were never built to meet. Borti et al. [25] offer a fuller worked example, applying Ubuntu as a complete research paradigm from sampling through analysis in a study of Ghanaian teacher education; my own use of Chilisa's relational ontology is narrower, confined to the positionality question rather than extended across the whole research design.

Figure 1 maps how these elements interacted. The scholar-practitioner position feeds two co-existing forces, productive positionality and confirmatory risk, which the four reflexive safeguards attempt to manage against two standards: an individualist test of whether each managed my own bias, and a relational test of whether the resulting account stays accountable to the centres it describes. Of the four, only the cross-case protocol yields a verifiable outcome against the documented record, meeting the individualist test and partly meeting the relational one, tied to Case 3 (Section 5.3); the other three carry no demonstrated outcome on either standard.

Productive positionality and confirmatory risk co-existed throughout the study and were managed, imperfectly and unevenly, through the safeguards discussed in Section 5, not eliminated by them.

4. Methodological Design and the Shaping Force of Positionality

4.1. Paradigm and Approach

The study adopted a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, grounded in the view that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the knower and the known [1]. This choice was not merely conventional. The phenomena under study, the instructional leadership practices of principals as understood and experienced by those within the system, were inherently perspectival. A positivist approach focused on statistical relationships between measurable leadership behaviours and graduation rates would have prioritised measurement over contextual understanding. It would also have positioned me as a neutral observer, a position that was difficult to sustain given my institutional role. Given my institutional role, that positioning would have been both incoherent and hard to sustain.

The interpretivist framework made my positionality visible rather than masking it. This does not resolve the reflexive challenges of insider research, but it creates space to address them honestly, rather than hide them behind a claim to objectivity the research situation could not support.

4.2. Sampling, Access, and the Ethics of Familiar Terrain

The study used purposive sampling, drawing participants from all five main brigade campuses in the region, each headed by a substantively appointed principal. Of a targeted 20 participants, five principals and 15 lecturers, 18 were interviewed, a 90% response rate. The shortfall was two people: the Case 3 principal and a Case 4 lecturer, both unavailable due to scheduling conflicts that could not be resolved within the data collection window. This near-census approach was methodologically robust, but it carried a positionality implication. I was not selecting a sample from an abstract population; I was selecting participants from a system I was professionally embedded in, some of whom I knew personally, and all of whom knew my institutional status.

Three explicit criteria drove the selection of these five centres; convenience was not one of them. A centre had to be led by a substantively appointed principal rather than someone acting or seconded, so the interview data would reflect an established leadership relationship rather than a transitional one. It had to have held BQA accreditation for at least three years before data collection began, so that principals and lecturers had enough tenure under the current regime to speak from experience rather than first impressions. And it had to sit within the Southern Botswana region, administratively separate from my own posting, a point taken up further below. Five centres met all three criteria, and that turned out to be the entire eligible pool. That is why the design ended up as a near-census rather than a sample drawn from some larger population of eligible sites.

Ethical clearance came from the University of South Africa (UNISA) College of Education Ethics Review Committee (Ethics Clearance Ref. 2024/10/12/000000215/05/RB), and the Ministry of Education and Skills Development granted permission to proceed. None of the five cases included my own institution. I am based at a brigade centre in the Okavango District in north-western Botswana, roughly 1,300 km from the Southern Botswana sites studied here, which fall under a different regional administration. This ruled out any direct line of authority over the participants, though it did not remove the broader familiarity, a shared national scheme of service and accreditation regime, discussed throughout this article. Participants gave written informed consent, and I explained that the research was academic rather than an institutional evaluation. I anonymised all sites and participants with pseudonyms. Even so, the possibility that participants adjusted their accounts because of my institutional identity cannot be ruled out. As discussed in Section 3.3, this could have pushed toward greater candour or toward caution, and neither effect can be separated out from the data.

4.3. Interview Process: The Perils and Possibilities of Professional Fluency

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection instrument, supported by documentary analysis of institutional records, treating documents as data in their own right rather than background material [26]. The semi-structured format itself carries methodological assumptions worth naming explicitly, following Ruslin et al. [27], who argue that such interviews function best when researchers remain reflexively aware of how their own framing shapes what a participant is prompted to disclose. Interviews were conducted in English, the medium of instruction across Botswana's brigade system, and all participants were fluent in English. No translation was therefore required. My own professional familiarity both enriched and complicated the interview process. On the productive side, probe questions could be pitched with institutional specificity. When a principal described difficulties with BQA accreditation monitoring, I could probe the distinction between programme accreditation and assessor accreditation, a distinction that matters institutionally but that a researcher without direct BQA experience might not have thought to pursue.

On the complicating side, that familiarity created a risk of conversational shortcuts. When researcher and participant share institutional membership, conversation can move quickly from surface accounts to shared understanding without assumptions ever being spelled out. A participant might mention 'the procurement problem' without elaborating, and I might note the reference and move on, losing the thick description that makes findings legible to readers outside that context. I managed this partly by making institutional references explicit: treating every institutional reference as needing spelling out for the written record, even when it was already understood in the room.

The thematic analysis itself went through four stages, following the parent thesis. I began with line-by-line open coding of each transcript, done independently case by case, generating descriptive codes rooted in participants' own language rather than categories imported in advance. Those codes were then grouped into candidate sub-themes within each case and checked against the documentary record before any comparison was made across cases.

Cross-case comparison came next, discussed further in Section 5.3: the same coding frame was applied to all five cases regardless of how familiar I already was with any particular one, and every candidate theme had to trace back to a specific quotation or document rather than resting on a general impression. Finally, I consolidated the themes into the analytic categories reported in the parent thesis and revisited them for this article. Two mechanisms did the work of managing researcher subjectivity here: the evidence-grounding rule just described, which ruled out interpretive claims that could not be traced to a specific data point, and the audit trail (Section 5.4), which kept a record of why a code was created, merged, or dropped. Neither of these makes the analysis subjectivity-free. Both are safeguards of exactly the kind this article evaluates elsewhere, and Section 5 holds them to the same evidentiary test as the other three. The staged structure follows, in general shape, what Naeem et al. [28] describe for building a conceptual model out of qualitative data, adapted here for a multiple-case, insider-research setting.

5. Reflexive Safeguards: What Each One Was Designed to Do, and What It Actually Changed

I used four reflexive safeguards throughout the study. They correspond loosely to the four strategies for active reflexivity proposed by Soedirgo and Glas [6]: recording assumptions, routinising and systematising reflexivity, bringing other actors into the process, and showing the work in the published account. Rather than assume these were effective because they were used, I hold each below to a stricter test: not whether the safeguard existed, but whether I can point to a specific, verifiable instance of it changing an interpretation. As the subsections show, only the cross-case protocol (Section 5.3) meets that test; for the other three I describe their design honestly rather than reconstruct an example after the fact.

Each safeguard is assessed against the two standards from Section 3.4, the individualist test of whether it managed my own bias and the relational test of whether the resulting account stays accountable to the centres it describes. A safeguard can pass the first while leaving the second untouched, and most of the four do so. This discipline is what Section 6 returns to.

5.1. Reflective Journalling

I kept a reflective journal throughout data collection and analysis, recording analytical decisions, emerging interpretations and my own scrutiny of my reasoning. It worked in two modes. Before each site visit, it captured my expectations of what I would find, giving a baseline to check later interpretations against. After each interview and analytical session, it recorded moments of surprise, where data diverged from expectation, and moments of recognition, when the data confirmed existing beliefs. I treated the latter with more suspicion rather than accepting them automatically.

I cannot point to a specific, dated journal entry that demonstrably changed a finding. The journal was kept in the general manner described in the parent thesis, as a running record of decisions and reactions, but not with the evidentiary discipline that would let me reconstruct, with confidence, a specific before-and-after shift in interpretation months or years later. Any account I could offer of a precise moment the journal caught a bias would be a plausible reconstruction rather than a verified fact, and I am not willing to make that claim here.

This is a genuine limitation of how I practised journalling, not merely a limitation of journalling in principle. Keeping a journal and keeping a journal built for retrospective evidentiary reconstruction are not the same discipline, and I did not consistently do the second. Peer debriefing, which I did not use here for logistical reasons, would have added an external check that journalling alone cannot provide, regardless of how it is kept. Scholar-practitioners in similar positions may want to build both peer debriefing and dated, retrievable journal entries into the design from the start, with the explicit aim of being able to substantiate specific claims of change later, not only to have practised reflexivity but to be able to show it. Against the relational standard, its contribution is even more limited: a journal records the researcher's own reactions, not anything a participating centre could recognise as its own.

5.2. Member Checking

Following verbatim transcription, participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts and emerging interpretations for accuracy, consistent with the trustworthiness strategy described in the parent thesis. Those who responded confirmed the material was accurate, and I incorporated minor factual corrections.

Beyond confirming accuracy, I cannot point to a specific, documented instance where member checking demonstrably altered a thematic interpretation, in the sense of a dated correction on record that changed the analysis. This is a real gap, not a modest one. Member checking is often treated as strengthening credibility simply because it was undertaken, but that is precisely the performative use of a safeguard this article argues against. Without a retained record of what participants corrected and how that changed my interpretation, I cannot make a stronger claim than that member checking confirmed descriptive accuracy, which is useful but is not the same as demonstrating that it caught and corrected an interpretive bias.

Member checking's limitation is well documented [29]: participants can confirm they said what the transcript records, but cannot judge whether the researcher's thematic interpretation of it serves or distorts their meaning. My own practice compounds this limitation: even where interpretive corrections may have occurred in the course of member checking, I did not retain them in a form that lets me demonstrate it now. Future scholar-practitioners might supplement member checking with interpretive member checking, returning provisional thematic summaries rather than just transcripts, and, just as importantly, keep a dated record of what changed as a result, so the safeguard's evidentiary value survives past the moment it was used. The relational gap is wider here: confirming a transcript says nothing about whether the account later built from it is one the centre would recognise as serving it.

5.3. Cross-Case Analytical Protocols

The five-case structure provided an opportunity to use analytical consistency as a reflexive check. At the analysis stage, I applied identical coding frameworks and thematic procedures across all five cases before any cross-case comparison. This protocol was designed to resist my prior knowledge of some sites, where familiarity risked importing contextual knowledge not actually in the data. It guarded against this by requiring every interpretive claim to be grounded in evidence: a specific quotation, a documented record, or a fieldwork observation.

This safeguard mattered most in Case 3, where the principal had scheduling conflicts throughout the data collection window that repeated attempts could not resolve, so I could not obtain a direct interview with the principal at that site.

Applying the same protocol meant Case 3 received the same analytical treatment as the other cases. Its analysis relied more heavily on lecturer interviews and institutional documents rather than filled in with my own prior institutional knowledge, which would have been tempting but indefensible. The limitation is that consistency is not the same as neutrality. I designed the frameworks myself, and my positionality shaped their construction. Future studies could strengthen this by involving a collaborator in designing and applying coding frameworks, creating an independent analytic check that internal protocols alone cannot replicate. Of the four safeguards in this account, this is the one for which I can point to a specific, verifiable outcome against the documented record, returned to in Section 6. Relationally, the outcome is only partial: the protocol disciplined my reading of the evidence, but the centres were never asked whether they would recognise the resulting account as serving them.

5.4. The Interpretive Audit Trail

I maintained an audit trail documenting the sequence of analytical decisions, from initial open coding through thematic refinement to final synthesis. In insider research it does more than establish confirmability [29]: in principle it creates a visible record of where positionality was most likely to shape interpretive choices, and of the reasoning used to manage that.

In practice, the trail I kept documents decisions at the level of coding and case treatment, discussed in Section 5.3, more reliably than it documents the finer-grained, moment-to-moment shifts in interpretation that Section 6 argues substantive reflexivity needs to demonstrate. This is the audit trail's main limitation as I kept it, since it operates retrospectively and at a coarser level than the specific claims it would need to support. Catching and demonstrating fine-grained interpretive shifts needs a trail built for that purpose from the start, which mine, in hindsight, was not. On the relational standard the trail is silent by design: it is internal to the researcher and answerable to a future examiner, not to the communities the account describes.

Taken together, the four safeguards fail the relational standard in a similar way. Recognising this limitation also points to what a more relationally accountable practice might involve. It would not add a fifth safeguard so much as redirect the existing ones outward. Member checking would ask participants not only whether a transcript is accurate but whether the account built from it is one their centre would recognise as serving it. The reflective journal would record not just my own shifting reactions but the obligations I incurred to the people whose work I was interpreting. The audit trail would document answerability to those communities alongside answerability to a future examiner. None of this was designed into the study reported here, which is precisely why I can name it only as a direction; but it shows that Chilisa's relational ontology is not merely a second yardstick for judging insider safeguards after the fact. It is a way of building them differently from the start, and that, for scholar-practitioners embedded in the communities they study, may be the more consequential contribution of the relational turn.

Table 1 summarises the four safeguards, the standards against which they were assessed, and the evidentiary status of their outcomes.

Table 1. Reflexive risks, safeguards, limitations, and analytical outcomes.

Positionality Risk	Safeguard	Individualist Test (Own Bias Managed?)	Relational Test (Accountable to the Centre?)	Evidentiary Status
Over-identification with principals	Reflective journal	Kept, but no dated entry showing a specific interpretation changed	Not addressed: journal recorded my reactions, not what the centre would recognise	Design intent only; effect not demonstrated
Confirmatory bias from prior beliefs	Cross-case protocols	Met: every claim traced to a quotation or document, verified in Case 3	Partly: claims are evidence-grounded, but centres were not asked to recognise the account	Demonstrated for one case (Case 3)
Authority effects with lecturers	Member checking	Limited: confirmed transcript accuracy, not interpretive correction	Not met: accuracy of record is not the same as an account the centre would own	Descriptive accuracy confirmed only
Institutional familiarity bypassing thick description	Audit trail	Coarse-grained: documents coding decisions, not moment-to-moment interpretive shifts	Not addressed: internal to the researcher, invisible to the community described	Institutional references made explicit; interpretive effect not demonstrated

6. Substantive Reflexivity and Its Performative Double

A distinction increasingly discussed in the literature [8, 30] separates substantive reflexivity, practice that demonstrably changes what a researcher finds, from performative reflexivity, where a positionality statement appears in the text but the analysis underneath is unchanged. I have tried to hold this article to the substantive standard, for two reasons. Methodologically, an unexamined claim that reflexivity occurred does not show positionality was managed, only that it was mentioned. More simply, performing reflexivity without practising it risks misrepresenting what I actually did.

I did not confine reflexive discussion to a positionality section in the methodology chapter. It appears at the specific points where positionality mattered most: in how I formulated interview probes, in cases where I had prior institutional familiarity, in the analysis of principals' challenges where over-identification risk was highest, and in the limitations discussion, where I have tried to draw the interpretive boundaries as honestly as possible.

Soedirgo and Glas [6] call this "showing our work": making the trail from assumption to revision visible in the published account rather than asserting that reflection occurred. Applying that standard honestly to my own account, rather than only to the general design of the safeguards, is less flattering than I would like. Of the four safeguards described in Section 5, only the cross-case analytical protocol produces a specific, verifiable instance I can substantiate against the record: applying the same protocol to Case 3 despite the missing principal interview, rather than filling the gap with prior institutional knowledge. That is one real, traceable example of a safeguard changing what the analysis could and could not claim. For reflective journalling, member checking, and the audit trail, I cannot supply an equivalent example, because I did not retain the kind of dated, specific record that would let me demonstrate one rather than assert one.

Using a reflexive safeguard and later demonstrating that it changed something are not the same achievement. This distinction is central to the article: reflexivity may be practised without being made auditable. That is a more useful methodological lesson than a tidy set of worked examples would have been. What it demands of a study's design, as opposed to what it reveals about this one, is taken up in Section 7.

7. Lessons for Scholar-Practitioners

This account suggests a few working lessons for scholar-practitioners researching institutions they belong to. They are reflections grounded in one study, not tested propositions or generalisable rules, and some will travel further than others into different contexts. Two concrete changes stand out for anyone designing a similar study. First, I would keep a dated, retrievable reflexive journal built from the outset to evidence specific before-and-after shifts in interpretation, not merely to record that reflection took place. Second, I would bring a collaborator into the coding, so that the cross-case protocol carries an independent analytic check rather than resting on frameworks I designed and applied alone.

Insider status seemed to sharpen interpretive depth mainly when paired with deliberate reflexive safeguards. Without them, the same familiarity that made rich interpretation possible could just as easily have gone unchecked toward confirmatory bias. The safeguards did not remove the risk. They made it visible enough to work against.

Professional proximity to participants was not a problem to solve but a condition to hold in tension. Being close enough to a case to understand its texture, and close enough to a participant's constraints to over-identify with them, turned out to be nearly the same closeness. Managing this as an ongoing tension, rather than treating it as contamination to eliminate, was more useful than chasing a distance my role did not actually allow.

Reflexivity mattered to the quality of the research only where it was traceable to a specific decision; a positionality disclosure on its own showed little about whether positionality was actually managed. The clearest lesson is one of design: intending to practise reflexivity and building a record able to prove it later are different disciplines. The second must be designed in from the start, by dating and retaining the specific instances where an interpretation changed, at the time it changed, rather than reconstructing them afterward. The single-author, single-system shape of this study is what made that admission possible: with no co-author's timeline to reconcile, naming the shortfall cost nothing but candour.

These observations are a modest contribution to an ongoing conversation, particularly among scholar-practitioners in African educational research, where institutional membership, relational accountability and qualitative rigour intersect in ways I have only begun to work through here.

8. Discussion: What This Reflection May Add to the Conversation

This account does not resolve the methodological questions it raises, but it may be useful to other scholar-practitioners in three specific ways: theoretically, methodologically, and practically. Each is discussed in turn below.

8.1. Theoretical Contribution

The account brings the discussion of African insider-research positionality into the specific context of TVET leadership, where it may be useful to others working in comparable TVET or vocational-education leadership settings. In this respect, the reflection sits closer to the practitioner-inquiry tradition [31] than to conceptual or theory-building scholarship. Practitioner inquiry treats practitioners' systematic inquiry into their own institutions as legitimate knowledge production rather than as a compromised version of 'real' research [32].

The article's clearer conceptual and methodological contribution is the distinction between substantive and performative reflexivity examined in Section 6, where the account is tested against Soedirgo and Glas's [6] standard directly rather than only cited [8, 30]. Whether the evidence presented here supports the broader case for substantive over performative reflexivity is for the reader to judge. I think it does, because the alternative, claiming success across all four safeguards without a record to support it, is precisely the performative move this article argues against.

8.2. Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, the account moves beyond a general endorsement of positionality as an active stance (Section 3.2) towards a concrete examination of what four safeguards were designed to do, what the retained record allows me to demonstrate, and where that evidence falls short. This may be useful to other scholar-practitioners to the extent that their settings resemble this one. It is one detailed case, not a template.

Figure 1 provides an organising aid for holding productive positionality, confirmatory risk and structured safeguards in one picture. It may be useful to scholar-practitioners planning and documenting their own reflexive practice.

This account also needs to address the strongest methodological objection to it. Savolainen et al. [33] argue that positionality and reflexivity statements should be avoided altogether: they are constrained by the very positionality they try to address, they do little to reduce bias compared with the ordinary discipline of evidence-grounded argument, and they risk substituting biographical disclosure for methodological rigour. I do not attempt to refute that argument in general terms here. My response is narrower. I evaluated the safeguards described in this article by whether they changed a specific, documented interpretation, rather than by whether a positionality statement was present. If Savolainen et al. are right that disclosure alone does little, I agree, and have tried, only partly successfully by my own account in Section 6, to show something more demanding than disclosure. Whether tracing documented change is enough to answer their deeper objection, that any such trail is authored and evaluated by the same researcher whose bias is in question, is not something this single account can settle.

8.3. Practical Contribution and Stakeholder Implications

Practically, the discussion of the safeguards and **Figure 1** are offered as working tools rather than settled findings: a scholar-practitioner designing a similar study can use **Figure 1** to plan where positionality is likely to matter, and can use the evidentiary standard in Section 5 to decide, in advance, what kind of record a safeguard would need to leave to be demonstrable later.

Different readers are likely to draw on this account differently. Doctoral students and early-career scholar-practitioners are its most direct audience: Section 7's lessons speak most concretely to someone designing a similar insider study from the outset. Experienced researchers supervising such students may find that distinction (Section 6) useful as a standard for evaluating a candidate's reflexivity chapter, rather than accepting a positionality statement at face value. Wider applications, to ethics review or to TVET policy, are conceivable but lie beyond what a single retrospective case can support, and I do not press them here.

9. Conclusions

This reflexive account has five limitations worth stating plainly, the first the most consequential. As detailed in Section 6, the evidentiary standard set by this article is met for only one of the four safeguards; for the other three, I had not retained the dated record needed to demonstrate, rather than assert, a changed interpretation. Beyond this, the account is a single-author retrospective in which the reflexive practices described were designed, carried out, and evaluated by the same researcher whose positionality they were intended to manage. An external auditor might have identified effects that my own scrutiny missed.

It is also partly retrospective in a second sense, written up mostly at the doctoral writing stage rather than entirely in real time during fieldwork, so some effects may have operated below what retrospective analysis can reach. It is drawn from one national context and one TVET system, which limits how far it transfers to settings with different institutional histories, qualification frameworks or power configurations. And the lessons in Section 7 come from a single case rather than a synthesis across studies, so they are provisional: a starting point for dialogue, not a validated theory.

None of this erases whatever transferability the observations have. The underlying logic, productive positionality and confirmatory risk as co-present conditions managed imperfectly through structured safeguards, may also be relevant in other settings where researchers hold institutional membership in the systems they study. The lessons in Section 7 are working reflections that other scholar-practitioners can examine, refine or set aside as their own settings warrant. That distinction may have relevance beyond this case, although that remains to be examined elsewhere.

This article has worked through the idea that the scholar-practitioner position in qualitative institutional research is a demanding condition, capable of producing both richer contextual insight and deeper interpretive risk, and that both need taking seriously at once. Substantive reflexivity, on this account, is not a genre of disclosure but a practice of analysis, one that has to be built for evidentiary demonstration from the start, a distinction I arrived at only by trying, and partly failing, to meet my own standard in Section 6. This reflection contributes modestly to insider-research scholarship, not by fully demonstrating that reflexivity produces interpretive credibility, but by testing that claim honestly against one account and reporting where it holds and where it does not. I offer it to other scholar-practitioners working within the systems they inhabit, particularly in African TVET and educational leadership, as one contribution, including its shortfall, to a conversation it does not presume to close.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants gave written informed consent and were told the research was academic, not an institutional evaluation. All sites and participants were anonymised with pseudonyms.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative interview and documentary data supporting the findings discussed in this article are not publicly available due to the confidentiality and anonymity commitments made to participants and institutions under the terms of ethical clearance. Requests to access the underlying materials may be directed to the corresponding author, subject to the terms of that clearance.

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Conflicts of Interest

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AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used QuillBot solely for language refinement. No AI tool was used for data analysis, interpretation, or the generation of the study's scientific content or findings. All AI-assisted text was critically reviewed and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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