

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

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### **Abstract**

There are many challenges in undertaking ethically and critically defensible qualitative research for education. The chapter outlines how the book tries to create a safe public space for researchers, whether novice or experienced, to reflect on the complexities of such decision-making. In each chapter, different researchers make explicit their values, how they worked to implement these in their research projects. Questions are raised about representation and voice, power and empowerment and what constitutes ethical research in each project. In so doing, researchers consider the messiness of the lived realities of research projects. This includes the difficulties in gaining ethical approval, especially when proposing methodologies such as visual and digital methodologies or proposing to work with people deemed vulnerable. To scaffold coherence in the book, chapter authors were invited to address a set of key questions, illustrating their answers with examples from their research practices to recount the challenges they faced. The chapters are arranged into two sections, the first focusing on those with and for children and young people and the second on adult learners. In the closing two chapters, the editors reflect on the main themes around ethicality and criticality emerging from the researchers' accounts.

### **Context and challenges**

Institutional structures, cultures and practices are a sub-set of wider socio-political discourses. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century they reflect the dominance of the market as a mechanism and discourse for describing how people and institutions interact, privileging competition over exchange and the efficient use of resources over other social values, such as support for the vulnerable. Through a desire to avoid risk linked to the demands of the markets in which they compete, universities in the USA and much of Western Europe developed ethical review processes to avoid reputational damage and potential litigation arising from research studies carried out under their auspices. This new audit culture is policed by various regulatory mechanisms such as institutional Ethical Review Boards (ERBs), the term used throughout this book, but sometimes called Human Research Ethics Committees or Institutional Review Boards, depending on national settings.

For researchers, this new regime took the place of traditional professional cultures. It regimented them into particular models of research design or normative approaches to gaining consent and relationship-building with participants rather than risking novel qualitative research designs which might generate valuable studies of marginal socio-cultural situations. It left researchers with the task of preparing project applications which represented culturally appropriate designs with demonstrable ethical integrity while identifying and mitigating risks and promoting beneficial outcomes for society.

Limiting what is considered appropriate research design constrains researchers from harnessing existing theoretical and methodological ideas to answer new questions and

develop novel theoretical and methodological understandings (BERA, 2018, para 59). Researchers need the space to be critical and open-minded about what evidence is needed and how this might be appropriately sourced in order to carry out research in culturally appropriate and sensitive ways. Such research will make the familiar unfamiliar, challenge assumptions, taboos and power differentials and reach marginal and vulnerable members of society (Busher and Fox, 2020). Despite their support of a utilitarian ethical framework for research projects, ERBs can be persuaded to support critical, creative or novel methodological approaches. However, researchers must provide the evidence that such approaches will demonstrate ethical integrity and create valuable research that is socially beneficial and unlikely to cause the university any reputational harm.

This book considers the challenges of undertaking ethical and critical qualitative research in education using a variety of methodologies, including those based on participatory, visual and digital methods. It shows how studies can gain a ‘favourable opinion’ from an ERB by foreseeing problems and minimising the potential for harm while trying to maximise benefits. It provides educational researchers with resources to explain their choices of research methodology, methods and processes to ERBs while deepening their ethical and methodological thinking. The authors of the chapters reflect critically on the messiness of the lived realities of their research projects, their use of less common research methodologies to suit particular social situations and how they might have acted in other ways to tackle the problems they encountered, including those of power and discrimination. For this reason, throughout this book non-gendered language is used unless gendered language is thought appropriate or relevant<sup>1</sup>.

To guide the chapter authors’ reflections, the editors of this book invited them to illustrate their discussions with examples from their practice and to respond to four questions:

1. What values prompted you to do this work and how did you share these with participants?
2. What were the ethical considerations raised beforehand and how were these tackled in terms of meeting obligations (including to ERBs), maximising benefits and dealing with issues arising during the study and publication of it?
3. What does ‘empowerment’ and ‘voice’ mean to you as a researcher and how did you express this to your participants?
4. In what ways were the participants given opportunities to be empowered in or through your study?

These questions were derived from the editors’ collective reflections on their personal research and publication experience of thinking critically and ethically, and from engaging in British and European research association discussions and debates over the last decade. Two of the editors, Alison Fox and Carmel Capewell, are currently convenors of the BERA Special Interest Group in Research Methodology in Education; Alison is also a member of the BERA Blog editorial team and was part of the working group responsible for revising the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, now in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition (BERA, 2018). Hugh Busher is a former member of BERA and a member of the European Conference for Educational Research (ECER) attending networks on research in Ethnography and research in Social Justice and Intercultural Education and on Teacher Education. Carmel and Alison also work with Australian networks of researchers who have shaped their thinking.

The following sections outline the different authors' contributions to the book. The first section considers in brief the main foci of each chapter. The second section presents some of the themes that appear to emerge across chapters, but leaves it to readers to develop those ideas further.

## **Separately**

Each chapter can be considered a case study of a particular research project by established researchers in the field of education who used a variety of less common methodologies to address questions of ethical and practical importance in a range of different UK and international contexts. Each chapter illustrates how researchers reflect on their decisions about research design, through discussing the specific ethical and methodological dilemmas they encountered. The chapters are arranged in two sections, the first being six studies with and for children and young people of school age, and the second being six studies focused on adult learners.

In Section One, three of the chapters are based on international research in Southern Africa and Ireland, with the others being based on research in England. McGregor and Frodsham focus on the persistence and perseverance necessary for overcoming an ERB's reluctance to support research on children's views, voice and volition. In it they consider how ethical issues and concerns can be overcome if researchers can show that data in a research project can be collected and presented without distressing participants and making teachers feel uncomfortable. The key to this, they assert, lies in showing how the recording of children's creative actions and utterances can avoid invading their privacy through the careful and thoughtful handling of visual and verbal data by researchers.

Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani focus on building a case for inclusive ways of knowing. They start from the standpoint that children and young people are experts in their own lives, a theme taken up in a different way in a later chapter by Busher. As such, they claim that the research process should value children's perspectives through a research process of ethical and authentic engagement with them. They provide a case study of a research workshop in Zimbabwe which challenges the reader to critically reflect on the ethical and political pursuit of inclusive education. It also raises question about how values associated with inclusive education are negotiated, made explicit and upheld (or not) through the design and implementation of research principles and processes that seek to be inclusive.

Working with young people with autism and ADHD in Ireland is the focus of the chapter by O'Siorain Car-Fanning and McGuckin, based on their experiences as teachers of young people. They reflect that, 'as in other parts of Europe, this now requires teachers to become 'expert' in autism theory and practice' (pp. xx). However, a major issue is for autistic participants in research to understand what research in practice means. The authors reflect on how researchers can transform the technical language used in research to reduce the barriers to understanding for autistic participants. They consider the ethical tensions of the ongoing nature of exploring a phenomenon such as literacy with autistic people and discuss how to enable teachers of autistic learners to embrace collaborative research projects with and for young autistic and ADHD children and their families.

The complexities of hearing students' voices through the use of photo-narratives is discussed by Busher. He considers the ethical and micro-political complexities of a research project

which tried to help students to express their identities in relation to the official policy and value discourses of a secondary school in England. However, this raised questions about the flows of power, micro-politics and ethics in school-based studies. Students can often articulate clearly what they experience as effective and ineffective teaching and learning practices and relationships between teachers and students. While this can help teachers and senior staff to reflect on their practice, it can also be perceived, especially by senior staff as a threat to their authority. The chapter also reflects on the ethical permissions the researchers negotiated with their university's ERB and, collaboratively with teachers and students.

Capewell shows how diaries and hearing maps can form a diagnostic tool to facilitate communication between adults and three-to-seven-year-old children with glue ear in England. She considers how, by keeping diaries, children can breakdown a situation to analyse and express the impact of the environment on their ability to access understanding speech in noise. Like two earlier authors in this book she argues of the importance of encouraging children to play a central part in data generation; giving them the choice of how much and when they recorded their perceptions; and decision-making over the interpretation of the impact different locations had on their ability to understand what is said to them. She found that children as young as three years old demonstrated sophisticated analytical and evaluating skills. It suggests that many of the concerns of ERBs regarding exploitation of children as participants could be challenged and overcome if researchers develop a methodology through which children control their participation in research and are consulted in the design stages.

Arising from research with migrant learners in South African primary schools between 2016-2019, Hanna discusses the use of the picture book as a creative visual research method. She points out that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1999) expects children to be allowed to be involved in decision-making on anything that affects them, a point made by several other authors in this book, too. Like these other accounts, Hanna thinks that this responsibility extends to involving children in research to help make their voices heard. By using a wordless picture book, *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007), she wanted to show the children that their experiences were important to her as a researcher, in a school environment where home cultures were rarely discussed. Although this empowered children to share their voice, it also generated a major ethical risk. Through learners empathising with the characters, children could reveal more than they might have wished about their backgrounds, opening up sensitive conversations that she sometimes felt unqualified to navigate.

Section Two of the book focuses on studies carried out about, with and/or for adults as learners. Four of the chapters are based on international research in Europe, Denmark, Southern Africa and Thailand, while two relate to studies carried out in England. As with the chapters in the first section, each chapter draws on researchers' lived experiences with participants who were vulnerable because of personal characteristics, such as gender, age or identified disabilities, or were made vulnerable because of their situations, such as having been displaced from their home country, being trainees/students or working in isolation.

How teachers can empower their own professional development through using Twitter chats is the focus of Emke's chapter. Her participants were freelance language teachers across Europe, in danger of working in isolation with their groups of students. She places educational Twitter chats, i.e. moderated tweet conversations linked to a unique hashtag (#) under the spotlight to reveal a little studied example of how empowerment can occur. She

argues that investigations into educational Twitter chats need to engage with human and non-human actors in such studies, including the language teachers, the researcher and the Twitter platform, to overcome narrow, instrumental understandings of 'self-empowerment'. Her study reveals evidence that could be useful to other such professionals, and so, as such, highlights how dissemination will be important as an ethical responsibility for researchers in reaching out to them in terms of maximising a study's benefits.

Christensen raises ethical concerns about exclusions that took place in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) completed in small study groups for students in two Danish universities. As a professional teacher she began to be concerned about student behaviours she observed during periods when students were left to themselves to complete their PBL project. She uses notions of power, subjectification and problematization to challenge how groups are naturalized in the Danish pedagogical discourse as fundamentally good and unproblematic by revealing that this is far from the student's experiences. The research raised questions about the ethnographic exposure of exclusion in group learning and the obligation for a researcher to rethink their own role, which Christensen describes as 'ethos'.

Jack reflects on the role of displaced populations in institutional ethics approval processes and calls for greater participation of the displaced in the design and implementation of research of which they are the focus. ERBs tend to consider displaced people as a 'vulnerable population' needing protection, rather than people who can contribute to the debate as to what constitutes ethical practice for them. Consequently, the concept of vulnerability may serve to justify and perpetuate paternalistic and imperialistic approaches to research about and with those who find themselves in fragile contexts. She challenges that ERBs located a long way away from the site of a study may not be best placed to act as the arbiter of ethical practice there. In the case of her research in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, she proposes that, if the ERB had encouraged and supported the participation of the communities of displaced people in the research design, the research might have been more closely able to meet sound principles of ethical research.

Fox, Loe and Sida-Nicholls reflect on methods which reveal the social dimension to trainee teachers needs and support in their chapter. They focus on the role of a socio-mapping tool developed for use with training trainees to reveal their social networks as information which can be useful to them and those who support them throughout their training. Such insights can benefit the trainees, the training providers and those in their school placement contexts. The authors propose how the importance of making explicit a trainee's personal network in order to better understand their ability to develop a relational resilience and how this might contribute to successful entry into the profession. This study raises questions about how best to capture data to benefit both the individual trainee participants and the wider project investigating the role of this socio-mapping tool. This led the authors to consider the interrelationship between the researchers ethical and methodological decision-making, in particular; recruitment, data collection and own sense of ownership. The researchers concluded that, to empower trainees, trainees should be central to creating and using their data to help them take responsibility for their development.

Through her critical realist research, Stutchbury discusses how she developed an in-depth, holistic study of five teacher educators in an African University was itself. She drilled down through the observable evidence to take account of the situation's wider context, the nature of the social structures in and around it and how people were empowered and constrained in exercising agency within it. The choice of the critical realist paradigm and the ethical issues

and dilemmas she encountered, are examined in detail as Stutchbury reflects on their implications for the researcher and the participants. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical implications of working within a paradigm that requires researchers to go beyond description and analysis in order to seek explanations. It shows why there was a strong moral imperative to understand why pedagogic change for this professional group is challenging.

Busher and James discuss how mature students can be empowered by expressing their shifting identities through the struggles of their learning journeys by creating free-drawn mind diagrams. These mind diagrams often revealed experiences of social injustice and discrimination that hindered participants' assertions of their aspirations for their lives. The chapter reflects on the interesting insights the diagrams presented as well as on how people can be helped to make their voices heard when they are marginalised in society. It also reflects on the importance of researchers' duty of care for participants, a different ethical dimension from the utilitarian model often promoted by university ERBs.

In the penultimate chapter, Fox and Busher draw together the various perspectives on ethics that have emerged in the different chapters in the book and consider their implications for ethical practice in research. Using the CERD framework (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009; Fox and Mitchell 2019), they show how four different ethical perspectives (consequential, ecological, relational and deontological) can be exercised to offer critical and complementary appraisal of studies, helping researchers to carry out studies that are ethical throughout each study's lifetime. They also discuss how these different perspectives can help researchers to make explicit their respectful approaches to representation, voice and the empowerment of participants while ensuring that they are appropriate and beneficial for the wider ecological systems in which they are located.

## **Together**

The authors discuss a diversity of methods which might be used to help participants to express their views in different social and educational situations. McGregor and Frodsham, Busher, Busher and James, and Fox, Loe and Sida-Nicholls made use of visual methods among others to collect participants' views. Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani and Hanna made use of visual storytelling. Capewell and Fox, Loe and Sida-Nicholls explore how tools can be used, together with dialogue, for diagnosis of issues to guide future actions. Emke explores the digital professional lives of teacher educators, focusing on the digital traces of Twitter chats to critically examine its potential for personal professional development.

Several of the chapters reflect on the issues raised by their studies without dwelling directly on the methods they used. Christensen focuses on applying an ethnographic methodology to reveal otherwise hidden student experiences. O'Siorain and McGuckin discuss transforming technical language used in research to reduce the barriers to accessing a real understanding of what research in practice means, either for participants or the teachers of participants. Stutchbury chooses a critical realist methodology to look under the surface of teacher educator agency and ask 'why' questions that offer new insights into pedagogic change. Jack and McGregor and Frodsham, focus on how to challenge ERBs restricted views of what constitutes acceptable research practices which are culturally respectful and contribute to the empowerment of those who have been marginalised.

The editors of this book intend it to appeal to national and international students undertaking research in and from UK universities at Doctoral and Masters level and, although the examples are drawn from authors who mainly, although not exclusively, reside in the Global North<sup>2</sup>, it is hoped that this will also appeal to researchers from the Global South (Dados and Connell, 2012; Odeh, 2010). It should be valuable to academics developing their practices as teachers and researchers, and as managers of research as well as to teachers carrying out their own research projects wherever they are in the world.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>. Gendered language: is commonly understood as language that has a bias towards a particular sex or social gender, including using gender-specific terms such as 'businessman' or 'waitress', or using the masculine pronouns (he, him, his) to refer to people in general. As the use of gendered language can perpetuate patriarchal hierarchy, where man is considered the norm and woman is othered, risking rendering women invisible in texts, such language is no longer acceptable in many sectors of society nor in academic writing.
- <sup>2</sup>. The term 'Global South' like 'Third World' or 'Developing Countries' distinguishes between wealthier and poorer countries in the world but emphasises geopolitical relations of power to recognise a conflict of interest between these countries.

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