

Playing the “Research Game” in Marginalised Fields

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In this paper we reflect on our combined work in some of the most marginalised educational contexts in the Southern Hemisphere. We draw on the work of Bourdieu to frame the paper. We propose the working in marginalised education settings requires a particular habitus or way of being to be able to play the research game. Underpinning our approach is the South African construct of Ubuntu, which is very much about collaboration—I am because we are—so that there is a move away from doing research “on” participants and contexts to one which is very much about doing research “with” participants and contexts. We find Bourdieu’s notion of game as a powerful construct to theorise ways of thinking about the field of educational research.

At the outset of this paper, we seek to articulate two key points. First this is a position paper where we seek to articulate particular ways of being and acting in educational research when working in marginalised contexts. Our intent is to provoke researchers to rethink their ways of formulating research and enacting research when working in marginalised contexts. For this research, the paper does not sit well with traditional forms of research publication, which is part of our intent to disrupt traditional research paradigms with their stylised ways of reporting research. Our second key caveat is that while we use the term ‘game’ to frame the paper, in no way should this be trivialised as a metaphor. Rather, from Bourdieu’s (1991) work with the notion of game, there is a strong sense of how the field of education in general, and mathematics education in particular have certain ways of being and acting within the field and, from this, certain rewards are bestowed on researchers. These rewards can be in the forms of capital, which again is a Bourdieuan construct to signify status. We will expand on these constructs in latter sections of the paper.

Background for the Paper

Both authors have worked extensively in our respective countries with some of the most marginalised communities within those countries. We draw on these experiences as they are quite different from our work in mainstream contexts. The practices that we have adopted have created ruptures in what would normally be seen to constitute “good” research practices. Our work, and the insights we have gained from more than a decade of research into our respective contexts form the basis of this paper. Our purpose in writing this paper is to challenge researchers who work in equity contexts to consider whether they are participating in hegemonic practices that support the reproduction of research paradigms (along with the production of deficit research narratives) that are unlikely to bring about change for our most marginalised learners. By reflecting on the work that we have undertaken, we propose to disrupt practices that may bring about status, in the form of capital for researchers working in this domain. We note that as with negative stories in the press receiving far more attention and viewership than positive stories, so too do deficit discourses about poor learner performance and poor teacher practices in marginalised communities receive high attention and citations. In order to tell different types of stories in contexts defined by marginalisation and deficit of economic and social capital, researchers need to partner with communities in ways that acknowledge our shared humanity and find a shared commitment to ways forward to the challenges faced in the communities we work with. In this respect, we propose several principles that have guided our research endeavours (sometimes intuitively and sometimes

explicitly) in our attempts to effect change in “hard-to-teach” schools and educationally challenged communities.

Adopting a Bordieuan Games Framework

Not dissimilar to Wittgenstein’s (1953) language games, Bourdieu (1991) proposed that games are part of social life except that one could argue, unlike a game of football or cards, the stakes are much higher in the game of life, or in the case of this paper, we argue, in the game of research. For Bourdieu (1991), the concept of games was a serious understanding of the field in which one is located. Whether this is a sport where one must have a feel for the game, or an aspect of social life, to amass power and status within that field, one must have a serious understanding of that field. Bourdieu (1991) argued that much like trumps in a game of cards, the forms of knowing and being within a social field act like forms of capital within that given field. Applying this games analogy to the field of research, when researchers amass certain forms of capital—such as publications, grants, consultancies, awards, positions on boards, citations, etc.—they become forms of capital that can be exchanged within the field for other forms of capital such as promotions, salary, larger more prestigious grants and so on. In order to gain the initial forms of capital, the researcher needs to read the game (with rules that are sometimes implicit and other times explicit) and engage with the game in order to succeed. These rules of the game are constructed in practices far removed from the grounded realities of the empirical fields where research occurs, and are often based on universal conceptualisations of the nature of educational empirical fields, dominated “by the North” (Valero & Vital, 1998).

The game is located within a particular field, in this case, of mathematics education. In this field, different forms of knowledge and ways of being are seen to be more valued than others. For example, to publish in certain journals, or even conference proceedings, particular forms of research and styles of writing are more valued than others. Where the researcher conforms with those rules (of the game) they are more likely to be published. Similarly, when applying for grants, whether high or low stakes grants, there are different forms of knowledge, methodologies, foci, and targets that are more likely to receive interest than others. Although published 20 years ago, Lerman and colleagues (2002) analysed the papers published in a range of significant publications in mathematics education and illustrated this case in point. Some types of papers—either in terms of theory, paradigm and/or method, were published in different journals while others were absent. Lerman et al.’s (2002) analysis illustrated who and what gets published in the field of mathematics education. From a Bordieuan games perspective, this illustrates that different forms of research and styles of publication can convey status on researchers when they play the game of (mathematics education) research. For those who want to amass capital there is a sense of knowing how to play the research game if one wants to succeed. Bourdieu (1990) suggested that buying into the game is often acquired through an unconscious process so that the , vis a vis researcher, is unaware of the ways in which the game is played and how capital is amassed by some and not others. Often there is an assumption that the game is fair and there will be natural winners and losers. In this way, the research game is perpetuated in a relatively unproblematic manner, thereby “reproducing the conditions of its own perpetuation” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 67).

When working in equity target contexts, there are markedly different challenges in the conduct of ethical research. As outsiders coming into a novel context and seeking to understand and/or change conditions of existence with the intention of improving mathematics learnings for marginalised learners, the rules of the game become foregrounded. Bourdieu (1990) argued that by standing outside the game, the observer can see the illusion that is created through the practices—the threats, the appeals, the steps that are taken by participants—to see how the game is enacted and the effect of that game.

Many of the assumptions we hold dear as researchers—such as objectivity, ethics, impartiality, truthfulness, impact—come under challenge when working in marginalised contexts. We provide a brief example. Intervention impact research often comes with an expectation of control groups. Control groups, however, are problematic to implement in the community contexts we have worked with. To establish such groups as separate from intervention groups (they do not receive the intervention support and are excluded from participation in the intervention), while expecting that they must agree to participate in being researched, goes against community values of access and fairness. Furthermore, we believe this practice would have detrimental consequences to the nature of researcher/community relationships. We further argue that promoting such research practices in schools and communities that go against the grain of community values and preferences, even if accepted might threaten researcher access to authenticity. In this respect, we have both spent the past decade resisting the ongoing pressure for our research to be contrasted with “control group” data.

We discuss several differences in the research that we have undertaken that we see as different from what is usually undertaken in the field. While beyond the scope of this paper, if one were to consider the types of successful high stakes grants awarded in Australia (for example), there would be notable trends in topics and methods that were embodied in those grants. Again, such an analysis would be indicative as to what was valued within the field, and what the researchers were doing that enabled their success, or capital amassing.

Ubuntu

Globally, there are many shared beliefs about the conduct and value of research. These shared values and beliefs are the foundations of the game of research. As noted earlier, often the game of research valorised by the university system is limited in scope and the practices that create symbolic power for those who observe the unspoken rules of the game. Those complicit with the rules, even at an unconscious level, can amass considerable capital. Bourdieu (1991) proposed that the game is able to perpetuate itself by and through the implicit buy in of the participants.

Researchers willingly, and often unwittingly, participate in the game through their actions. The research game is hegemonic and reflects the values of the dominant groups within the research community (Calhoun, 2003). There are some researchers who have articulated the divide between the north and south in reference to the hemispheres (Valero & Vithal, 1998). It is here we seek to offer our first challenge in the game of research.

We seek to challenge the hegemony of the northern viewpoint through the introduction of a term from Africa—Ubuntu. While Mandela brought some familiarity of this term to the world, noting, “In Africa there is a concept known as ‘ubuntu’—the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others; that if we are to accomplish anything in this world it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievement of others”¹, it remains a little-known term in the general research community. We propose it has significant value when considering the research game. A general translation of Ubuntu is “I am because we are,” which signifies the value of the collective in bringing about social change for the better and encompasses enacting humanity and humility. The term is derived from the phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates as “a person is a person through other people.” Increasingly, South African educators and researchers are exploring Ubuntu as a research and development paradigm and philosophy to guide meaningful and ethical work and doing

¹ <https://quotefancy.com/quote/874394/Nelson-Mandela-In-Africa-there-is-a-concept-known-as-ubuntu-the-profound-sense-that-we>

research ethics the African way (see for example, Seehawer, 2018; Seehawer et al., 2021; Mlondo, 2022).

There are many practices that have been foregrounded by organisations when working with marginalised groups. For example, the Indigenous Corporation Training (ICT, 2022) suggested a number of principles when working with Indigenous people. These included being trustworthy; transparent; respectful; invested; involved, and patient. While the principles have strong values and ways to work with Indigenous people, questions need to be raised as to how well the current game of educational research would enable the true incorporation of such values into a research project. To this end, we suggest while the principles have intrinsic value, their incorporation at a deep level may not be realised fully. Adopting an Ubuntu perspective of the research game would require researchers to be part of the solution of marginalisation and, in so doing, reconceptualise aspects of the game of research. Where the “I am” refers to the researcher, the “we are” suggests that through collaboration, the researcher and the participants (considered in a wide sense) become a collective we and the “we” collaboratively learn through the research and engagement process. This challenges the orthodoxy of contemporary research games.

In the following sections, we draw on the principles that we have adopted in our research programs that attempt to refigure the research game so to better work with marginalised learners and contexts, particularly given researchers’ outsider status.

Rules of The Game in Marginalised Contexts

From our combined (see for example, Graven & Jorgensen, 2018) and separate work across our South African and Australian geographically and culturally diverse contexts, we have proposed a number of principles or rules, that regulate our work in marginalised contexts (Jorgensen & Graven, 2022).

Establish Trust and Mutual Understanding

Increasingly schools and systems are sceptical about the intentions of researchers. It has been common practice for considerable time that researchers would enter schools, conduct their research, and then publish findings. In some cases, particularly in marginalised contexts, research produced would paint a negative picture, based on deficit models of thinking of the learners and their contexts, and have little value or impact for the participants of the research (Graven, 2014). This is hardly surprising given that the research game rewards publications so the goal for the researcher is ‘publish or perish’. Similarly, the granting agencies expect outcomes, one of which is publication. Indeed, in the Australian context, a large allocation of the prestigious Australian Research Council grant is based on track record, and reports on funded grants must list the publications arising from the grant. What is needed is for a sense of trust and respect to develop between the researcher/s and the participants. This may take time but standing outside the game of research, it becomes possible to see that time constraints, and the concomitant sense of urgency of grants and publications, is part of the doxa of the game. It is this sense of urgency to conduct the research, and subsequently publish from that collected data that reproduces the game of research that ultimately hinders building relationships of trust and mutual understanding.

Being Authentic and Abandoning Status

As researchers coming from the University, and at professorial level, there is not only a need to acknowledge the status of these positions and what that entails, but more importantly, find ways to minimise the imbalance of power. The importance of the “we are” becomes a salient point and the mutualistic relationship between the researcher and the participants needs

to be established. By attempting to address and reduce the outsider status with its inherent power imbalance, the researchers need to shift from being in the context of the university (where academic demands dominate) to be in the context of the research. For us, this required us to (as far as possible) look at engagement and timelines from the perspective of the local communities. While grants may allow for charter flights to communities, this has the message of importance and status of the researcher. By taking a charter flight, even if well intended to reduce travel time for busy academics, it sets up an us/them divide from the very start of one’s arrival. Playing the game of the local communities would involve to preferably travel as they do—usually by land in a 4WD. Similarly, where one stays and how one dresses and presents in community can either create a divide or foster inclusion and respect for the community.

Being Part of the Team: Pitch In!

Research processes require researchers to conduct their work, report on that work and generate outcomes. The game is quite clear. However, this game is more often than not incongruent with the games within communities and schools. While the expense of the conduct of research in many remote, hard to reach communities is very high, resulting in increased pressure that unexpected community events do not disrupt one’s intervention or data collection plans, the realities and demands within the community and school are distanced from these needs. Many events happen in communities who are often resource poor and while events require urgent attention communities often struggle to manage with limited resources available. We have found ourselves in communities where there has been a funeral but with no people to erect tents for families who are grieving. The community needed support to cater for the people coming for the funeral so we spent our time erecting (and disassembling) tents for guests, supporting the preparation of catering to enable the smooth running of the funeral. We have been in sites over weekends where there are demands on the school and have found ourselves washing and painting walls, gardening, creating resources for classrooms. When teachers and communities have observed our willingness to participate in engaging with their needs (and parking our own), they have become more interested in our purpose for being in the school and community. Authentic relationships, partnerships and research with communities requires flexible navigation of the intersection of research and community practices and games.

Gaining Broader Community Trust

The communities in which we both work are ones where many foreign workers come into the community to support the local people. These include but are not limited to health and welfare workers, government agencies of all departments, not-for-profit organisations to offer various supports for the community. As researchers coming into the communities there is potential for an already visitor-weary school/community to see the researcher/s as yet another person coming into their community. The research game needs to be extended to think of schools as part of a much larger community. The communities are often inextricably linked with other organisations within the community so extending the reach of projects beyond the school gates assists non-school entities and people to be aware of the research projects and potentially become more involved in supporting research that they feel offers more than the fly-in-fly-out research projects. In our work in marginalised communities, we reach out to providers and agencies working in the broader community so that there is greater knowledge of the purpose of our presence in communities.

Being Identifiable

Researchers are usually outsiders to the school and coming into the school context can arouse suspicion and mistrust. Many strangers pass through communities and their purpose may be unknown to the community members. Part of being transparent and open is for

community members to know the origins and purpose of the strangers in their midst. Having items to identify the researchers—such as shirts with the employing body’s logo clearly visible—helps community members know the origins of the strangers. Also wearing name badges assists in the identification of researchers. While the status of “Doctor” or “Professor” may be status in the game of the University, it has little value (capital) in the field of the community. In our work, we do not use our titles so to reduce any potential power imbalances.

Gatekeeping and Authenticity

Gatekeeping is a term that suggests that there is a person or process that allows some researchers access, and potentially denies access to others. The gatekeeping process can have significant impact on the conduct of research (Poed et al., 2020). Gatekeeping intersects with other aspects of this paper, including trustworthiness of researchers and relevance of research projects to the school. Community and school gatekeepers may have a healthy scepticism of the intent of researchers who want to work *on* or *in* their schools. Given the time it takes to develop trust and rapport with teachers, students and community, the more expedient way to play the ‘successful’ game of research, the propensity to genuinely work *with* schools is quite an onerous task and can be beyond the usual parameters of research. While the hegemonic research game is for a researcher to have a project based on their expertise and implement this in schools, this process may be at loggerheads with the game of schools and may not genuinely meet their needs.

Beyond Formal Ethics: Responsiveness to Local Events and Customs

As researchers we are bound by the formal ethics of our employing bodies and the bodies/systems in which we conduct research. We are also bound by our own moral compass about the conduct of ethical research. The game of research may bind researchers to the objective structuring practices of ethics and ethical research. But there are also ethical considerations to be made in relation to the conduct of research in communities that are different from the hegemonic structures of University and School System ethics. Being respectful of the community norms is a very different game from the game of University Ethics. What are the rules of the game for communities in terms of gendered relations, hierarchical structures, or of cultural events such as deaths or births or other ceremonial occasions? Knowing the rules of these games is critical to the conduct of ethical research but these are quite different from the rules for the conduct of research within the University game.

Considering the Consequences of the Stories We Tell

As researchers, it is invaluable to consider the consequences of the stories that are told from the research process. As researchers, we need to consider our complicity in the reproduction of negative stories of teachers, communities, particular equity target groups and families. It is important to consider the role of deficit stories of the ‘ability’ of learners who live in poorer, more impoverished communities. These can lead to low expectations, self-fulfilling prophecies and a reproductionist agenda (Graven, 2014). Rather, than focus on what learners (and teachers, communities etc) can’t do, more positive stories and foci could be developed on the strengths and willingness to challenge these deficit stories. Learners in impoverished communities bring a wealth of knowledge and strengths to mathematics classrooms but these may be different from the structuring practices of schooling (e.g., strong visual-spatial and navigation skills of Aboriginal children). By challenging the orthodoxies of entrenched and taken-for-granted practices, new forms of knowing and being can be foregrounded.

Conclusions

In this paper we have set out to highlight a need to embrace an openness to shifting the rules of the ‘traditional’ notions of the research game for those who work with highly marginalised communities. The demands and needs of learners, teachers and teacher aids cannot be known by researchers without an openness to navigating flexibly and through a process of building relationships new mutually acceptable rules of the game. This may not be necessary for university researchers working with teachers and learners in high performing and highly functional schools. These latter schools might face few disruptions to planning and might buy in whole heartedly to the research agenda of the researchers. Often participants hold aspirations that perhaps one day they might study further or conduct similar research. Such aspirations can support buy-in to the research and the learning process. This makes for a very different research context than those of marginalised communities, schools and learners where there the aspirations of participants have little alignment with the researchers and research activities and incentives for participation need careful navigation.

In navigating the rules of the research game we have found that it has been essential to our work and learning in various under-served and marginalised communities to reconsider how rules that apply to ‘mainstream’ research contexts may need to be adapted for use in remote and or marginalised communities. Much of this learning and experience cannot be published or shared in conference platforms but builds towards opportunities for engaged authentic research that builds towards powerful new knowledge in our field. This paper emphasises our need to remain open to flexibly adapting one’s research goals, approaches and needs through engagement with participants and their school and broader communities. We express our deep gratitude for all those research participants and their communities who have allowed us to experience and understand ways to enact an ubuntu research perspective. The elaboration of an ubuntu research perspective, theoretically and methodologically, is emerging among various South African scholars across different fields of education. It is our hope that our reflections on our grappling with some of the rules of the research game from an ubuntu perspective contribute to this endeavour.

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