Socially Just Research

Susan Grieshaber[i]
La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia
ORCID: 0000-0003-2919-0904

Abstract

After explaining the context in which I began teaching and how I came to connect with the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education group, I briefly consider the idea of participant design research (PDR) and as part of that, partnering as method. Because of its focus on educational justice and movement beyond co-design, I see PDR as an activist approach to research design, and partnering as method as an example of methodological activism. I conclude with a question and a provocation.

Key words: social justice, equity, research design

I began my career as a preschool teacher in the late 1970s in a small country town in the central part of the state of Queensland, Australia, several hours drive from the coast. The school catered for students from preschool (children aged 4-5) to Year 10 (students aged 15). The number of Aboriginal children at the school was quite high and ranged from 15-20 per cent, depending on the year. As I soon learned, the town was a microcosm of society and the racism, sexism, homophobia, alcohol and drug consumption, family violence and so on, was overwhelming. Being such a small place meant these actions were on display for many to see and hear. The 'pillars' of the community were complicit. In this context, my hopes and aspirations as a beginning teacher were naïve and idealistic. After four years I moved to the capital city and began working in a low socio-economic area with a high migrant, refugee, and Indigenous population. I was keen to enrol in a master's degree, hopeful of finding some meaningful ways to address the injustices experienced by children and their families in the communities where I had worked. But it was not until I enrolled in a PhD that I found ways of thinking, being, and doing differently using theories quite unlike those associated with early childhood education (ECE). By this time, I was working in a university and found that these theories were not for everyone: some in the department would not teach with me because these theories were not 'what we do in ECE'. But I had found a path and knew that any change would be challenging, incremental, and take a long time.

Two of the examiners of my PhD lived in the USA and one suggested that I should attend a conference about reconceptualising ECE (RECE) being held in 1993 in Ann Arbor, MI (USA). I was keen to attend but was seven months pregnant with my second child and unable to fly. I had begun reading reconceptualist literature (e.g., Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Mallory & New, 1994) but it wasn't until 1996 that I was able to attend a RECE conference, which was held in Madison, WI (USA). I have attended many since, including hosting the first conference held outside the USA, in Brisbane, Australia, in 2000. Attending these conferences and reading the publications of those engaging in reconceptualist work (e.g., Lubeck, 1998; Silin, 1995) was, and remains inspirational. It nurtured my spirit and led to many exciting discussions and opportunities, including publication of an edited volume with Gaile Cannella (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001).

My concern with socially just societies and equitable forms of learning, teaching, and research stems from the injustices I witnessed as a teacher. These formative experiences framed how I tried to work as a teacher and later as an academic, and paved the way for research projects and associated publications that include equity issues in research design (Grieshaber, 2001), shifting from developmental to postmodern practices in EC teacher education (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005), troubling inequities in play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), and the inequities between teachers and educators working in ECE in Australia (Grieshaber & Graham, 2017).

In what follows, I share brief ideas about participatory design research (PDR) (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), an approach to socially just research design, and as part of that, the idea of partnering as method.

Socially just research design

Socially just research treats all participants equitably and aims at transformative social change by addressing injustice. Because it aims at transformative social change, PDR uses specific types of epistemology, ontology, axiology, methodology; historical, and relational perspectives (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). Theoretical stances consistent with PDR include structural critiques, theories of transformative social change, and theories that address colonialism, racism, sexism, and so on. PDR draws on a rich history of action, participatory, collaborative, community, social, and design-based research approaches, in conjunction with decolonising methodologies (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). However, design decisions (even with co-design) can easily slip into 'experts' (e.g., researchers) making decisions from a distance rather than through collaborative and sustained engagement with participants; the latter being a feature of PDR. As part of the concept, PDR focuses on "what forms of knowledge are generated, how, why, where and by whom" (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 174). This extends to careful and ongoing negotiation of the roles researchers as well as participants will play throughout the research. The ideas of researchers and "the researched" are reworked to include "the relational, pedagogical, and design-based activity of researchers themselves…creating potentially new openings for reciprocity, accountability, and the de-settling of normative hierarchies of power" (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 174). Organic grassroots community-based research that centres the involvement of historically marginalised peoples can challenge dominant epistemologies as well as change the power dynamics among researchers and participants because the traditional roles of researchers and their knowledge bases are positioned intentionally as fluid (Zavala, 2016). Intentionality of this nature opens opportunities for re-making traditionally established understandings of research, research relationships, and how research can be undertaken.

Partnering as method is an activist approach as it seeks more just forms of partnership, with such forms relying on knowing how "*inequitable* processes of partnering unfold, function, and feel" (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 174, emphasis in original). For ECE researchers, partnering as method can attend to the often-neglected methodological processes of purposefully building strong, mutual, and sustainable relationships to create shared learning and knowledge amongst researchers, policy makers, educators, and stakeholders (e.g., employers, industry). Unfortunately, little reconceptualist work has attracted the attention of groups such as policy makers and employers in the ways that it could. Reasons include the requirements of educators and their employers to focus on standardised mandatory documentation and reporting; the emphasis by policy makers on results from large scale studies to inform policy decisions related to curriculum and assessment; the contrasting vision and practices of socially just ECE, and the small-scale research that many reconceptualist researchers undertake. The motivation of reconceptualist scholars for transformative change emphasises the imperative for creating viable, just, and sustained ways of partnering to intentionally grow equitable forms of research, learning, and teaching. Relational dynamics at the centre of partnering as method concern ways of relating, knowing, being, and doing and these open possibilities for recasting established understandings of social relations and forms of learning and knowledge development with policy makers, stakeholders, and educators.

Ultimately socially just research design and enactment contribute to socially just democracies. As part of this, PDR aims to achieve "joint activity *across* researchers and communities, rather than being led by one or the other" (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 189). T conclude, I offer one question and one provocation. The question is:
- How might different epistemologies be brought together for the benefit of children, their families, and communities?

The provocation is:
- To change policy, the chances of success improve by working closely with policy makers in reciprocal, just, sustainable, and collaborative ways.

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[i] Sue Grieshaber's research interests are informed by a range of critical and 'post' theories that address social justice and equity, and include early childhood curriculum, policy, play, pedagogies, and families.