Research *With* or Research *On*: Exploring Tensions Between Ethics, Values, and Respect in Educational Research

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As a former student, elementary teacher, and a parent of three children in the French immersion (FI) program in New Brunswick, I have an intimate and inescapable relationship with the controversial language program. I have experienced the exclusionary effect of FI and expressed my dismay at a program that fails to fulfill the promise of bilingualism for all (Gerbrandt, 2022). I have also questioned how the unintended effects that disproportionately affect marginalized students are magnified when we examine the intersection of program and discipline (Gerbrandt, 2021). My doctoral work focuses on examining the tensions of learning mathematics in FI, where both the discipline (Zevenbergen, 2002) and the program (Kunnas, 2019) have been described as mechanisms for streaming students in public education.

This conceptual paper is the result of intentional learning and unlearning as I confront the challenges of doing research in a context that is inseparable from my identity. I begin by identifying the theories that explain how I see the world, connecting the ideas of an influential French sociologist from the 1950s to the intellectually liberating work of feminist post-structuralists. Together, these are the ideas that help me to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, as I develop a feminist research design for an elementary FI mathematics context.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Bourdieu's (1990b) Theory of Practice provides the conceptual tools - habitus, field, and cultural capital - that frame my doctoral study. Together, these 'thinking tools' (Grenfell, 2008) help to explain my experiences as a classroom teacher.

Habitus

Bourdieu describes habitus as a "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). With my discovery of the concept of habitus, I now had a word to describe how some students entered schools with the right attitudes, dispositions, and beliefs that made them seem especially easy to teach. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) defined a "reasonable" habitus as the "possession of the minimum economic and cultural capital necessary actually to perceive and seize the 'potential opportunities' formally offered to all" (p. 124). Lacking this, some students are less likely to access the same opportunities when entering the field of public education.

Field

Bourdieu describes the field as "an autonomous universe, a kind of arena in which people play a game which has certain rules, rules which are different from those of the game that is played in the adjacent space" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 215). Every social space we enter has its own set of unwritten rules, and our ability to navigate the space hinges on the habitus. This conjunction of habitus and field is the meeting of "subjective capacity and objective possibility" (Wacquant, 2014, p. 5). When the habitus aligns with the internal logic of the field, it becomes possible to have a feel for the game, or "the sense of a capacity for practical anticipation for the

'upcoming' future contained in the present" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 66). And so, some students enter school seemingly predisposed for schooling.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital explains the unequal academic achievement of children from different social classes. When controlling for economic position and social status, "students from more cultured families not only have higher rates of academic success but exhibit different modes and patterns of cultural consumption and expression" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 160). Cultural capital can appear in an embodied state (e.g., your propensity to quietly work sitting at a desk), an objectified state (e.g., your designer sneakers), or an institutionalized state (e.g., your parents' university degrees) (Bourdieu, 1986).

Though I have elected to borrow Bourdieu's concepts as the conceptual tools for my work, I am cautious about trying to use them to 'fix' things. In his efforts to define a scientific and objective theory of practice, Bourdieu viewed human subjectivity as inevitable, something that required disclosure and mitigation through theoretical reflexivity. But even this step of thinking about how the researcher relates to their subject does not address the detached and inaccessible language associated with his work. As such, I have come to explore possibilities for stepping outside of a Bourdieuan frame.

A Feminist Post-Structural Alternative

To confront the limitations of Bourdieu's theory of practice, I have turned to the works of feminist poststructuralists. Feminist post-structuralism troubles "that which is taken as stable/unquestionable truth" and contributes to "the lines of flight that may open up the not-yet-known" instead of maintaining the position of an outside observer (Gannon & Davies, 2011, p. 314). As a matter of ethics, values, and respect, I needed to take this step towards a more feminist conceptualization of research.

There is a strong tradition in empirical research that privileges objective, detached vocabulary (i.e., 'research participants,' 'sub-cases'). This preference contradicts my standpoint, which focuses on the people who I imagine working with as a researcher in the social sciences. I want to work with multi-dimensional parents and caregivers embedded in complex social structures. These people are not objects, and I am uncomfortable with dehumanizing language that suggests otherwise. I feel an obligation to respond to their concerns and to be willing to adapt my research design as needed. There is no experiment being conducted; no treatment being applied or withheld. But given the sociopolitical context of this study, there could be some risk to participants if confidentiality is not maintained. This raises the importance of remembering that research is about people. The type of research that I want to do does not vilify, other, or disempower those who have accepted the invitation to share their experiences.

This preference for detached Enlightenment-inspired language can influence the way we view ourselves in relation to the people involved in our studies. Social science researchers can often view participants as objects, things that can be evaluated and understood according to an unequal power-relationship between them (Brooks, 2017). Certainly, Bourdieu took this view, naming people and institutions as 'agents' operating in a field of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). By foregrounding relationships, perhaps the research process can become "a change-enhancing, reciprocally educative encounter" (Lather, 1992). Perhaps in this space of 'power with' I might find Tronto's 'caring with,' a phase of care "which embodies the value of

solidarity" (Barnes, 2019, p. 31). Like other feminist researchers, I value interactive methods for doing respectful research and resist privileging approaches that value prediction and control (Lather, 1992).

Research can be extractive, and I am mindful of my own positioning as I navigate consent. On the one hand, my identity as a previous classroom teacher might shorten the distance between my current role of researcher and the teachers I will observe; on the other hand, this same identity might cause a power imbalance when it comes to my interactions with students. I cannot write myself out of the research design, but I can be mindful of how my identity can influence the choices others make. Having worked in schools, I know that everyone experiences moments of vulnerability. Consent means that I check in with participants and honour the relationship between us. I believe that I can resist two-dimensional, static narratives by asking whether I represented them correctly. People are complex, and this step will help me to maintain some degree of human complexity within the recontextualization of their experiences. This is an important concern related to ethics and respect:

> Post-structural ethics in contrast struggles toward a different kind of respect for the other, one which does not divide researcher from researched, but comprehends their mutual embeddedness in discourse and relations of power. The research cannot thus be totally planned in advance but maintains its openness to the other, and to the ethical demands that arise in the encounter with the other, where the researcher will become someone-she-was-not-already (Gannon & Davies, 2011, p. 315).

I look forward to doing the type of research that is relational and dynamic, where the possibilities for change exist for everyone involved.

Conclusion

Respectful research requires respectful relationships. I am not interested in accepting an extractive, 'get in and get out as fast as you can' mindset. Adopting the role of academic researcher, I will enter schools as a curious ally, aware that allyship is relational and revokable. I am mindful of how it feels to welcome outsiders into the classroom, and one of my priorities is to establish relationships of mutual respect with classroom teachers. This investigation wades into sensitive territory. The FI program is a political lightning rod with strong opinions about whether the popular language program is helping or hindering the province's education system as a whole. As an ally, I need to maintain sensitivity to the heightened emotions regarding the program. And a feminist post-structural lens is the right counterbalance to the inescapable influence of Bourdieu's theory of practice in my research.

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