



## What's the use of educational research? Six stories reflecting on research use with communities

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### Abstract

The question of how education research can be ‘useful’ is an enduring and challenging one. In recent years, this question has been approached by universities through a widespread ‘impact’ agenda. In this article, we explore the tensions between usefulness and impact and present six stories that reflect on research use with communities. These stories engage issues of the risk of usefulness, the time that is needed to work collaboratively for research usefulness, whether theories developed in universities can be useful to communities for understanding the problems they face, who has the power to steer research to serve their purposes, and how community collective action can enhance the usefulness of research. The article concludes with a section that reflects on the importance of continuing to engage with the debates about research use in often highly commercially oriented university environments. This article brings together diverse voices that wrestle with the politics of research use beyond the neat, linear narratives of change that impact agendas tend to portray. These illustrations of the ethical dilemmas encountered through navigating research use with communities contribute to an ongoing conversation about refusing capitalist and colonialist logics of research extraction while working within institutions often driven by such logics.

**Keywords** Useful research · Community research · Politics of education research · Ethics

## Beyond impact: how might research be useful?

Eve Mayes and Sophie Rudolph

We write this article as a group of early and mid-career critical educational researchers and associates working in Australian universities who are attempting to further social justice in and through research with communities. Educational researchers working in Australian universities are expected to engage with non-academic audiences and to demonstrate research ‘impact’ and funding schemes require applicants to provide plans of the impacts of the proposed research and its ‘national benefit’.<sup>1</sup> Further, universities are required to produce impact case studies that measure and showcase the concrete benefits of individual projects,<sup>2</sup> while ‘toolkits’ have been produced to support researchers to generate impact<sup>3</sup> and researchers are encouraged to engage with broader publics through social media and public-facing publishing.<sup>4</sup> Research that can be commercialised and can demonstrate a direct line between a social problem and a ‘solution’ is particularly valued by universities and funding bodies. Impact has become a powerful discourse in Australian universities’ research cultures.

While the encouragement to work collaboratively with communities, activists, practitioners and policymakers is certainly welcome, we heed recent critiques of the ‘impact agenda’. The impact agenda has been observed to be a way to exert ‘greater accountability in respect of returns on public investment’ within a broader context of ‘the growing marketisation, commodification and privatisation of universities and academic life’ (MacDonald, 2017, p. 706). Concerns have been raised that there may be ‘little congruence between the imperative to write impact case studies’ and ‘efforts to make a difference to society’ (Laing et al., 2018, p. 169), with impact case studies overstating ‘real world’ effects (MacDonald, 2017, p. 696). Additionally, the impact agenda undervalues the slower, more relational research in favour of ‘more immediate, obvious or ‘sellable’ impacts’ (Smith et al., 2020, p. 2). At the same time, there have been hopes the impact agenda might offer ‘institutional space for work towards social justice’, with calls to make connections back to long-standing traditions of scholar-activism within critical social science and public sociology (MacDonald, 2017, p. 696).

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<sup>1</sup> The Australian Research Council (ARC) defines “impact” as “the contribution that research makes to the economy, society, environment or culture, beyond the contribution to academic research”; “impact” is distinguished from “research engagement”, which is defined as “the interaction between researchers and research end-users outside of academia for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge, technologies, methods or resources” (Australian Research Council, 2022). It should be noted that the ARC is currently exploring new directions for assessing and evaluating research impact/value.

<sup>2</sup> The Australian Research Council’s data portal includes examples of impact studies that received a “high” rating (e.g. see Australian Research Council, 2019, for examples for education).

<sup>3</sup> As two examples, The University of Western Australia has produced a Research Impact Toolkit (see The University of Western Australia, n.d.); Victoria University has produced resources on impact (Victoria University, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Macquarie University (n.d.) has produced: “Media and Social Media Guide for Academics”.

In 2022, we gave a symposium at the Australian Association of Research in Education conference to discuss the tensions, perplexities and questions that we experienced in our research with communities, sharing stories beyond the linear narratives of change usually associated with impact agendas. We considered the multivalent purposes of research and how power, politics, history and ideology shape what is possible when researchers work with communities. Our central concern was to relate the impact imperative to questions of history, ethics and power. We wondered about how histories of the extraction and appropriation of objects, skeletal remains, stories and knowledges contour contemporary logics of the 'academic industrial complex' (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 223). We grappled with how researchers can be complicit with the 'academic industrial complex' and how to foster community-oriented accountabilities from within the 'neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university' (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021, p. 1). We reflected on Sandy Grande's (2018, p. 47) call to work within, while simultaneously refuse, the university as an 'arm of the settler colonial state', and to attend to its logics of elimination, capital accumulation and dispossession in the process.

In this paper, we share these stories, and deliberately turn to an alternative term to 'impact': *usefulness*. Adult and community education researchers, working with critical pedagogic principles, have long talked about the creation of 'Really Useful Knowledge' (RUK) for critical consciousness and collective liberation (e.g. Johnson, 1988). We are inspired by long-standing work on the 'usefulness' of research: from Michele Fine and Ricardo Barreras' reflections on being 'of use' and how educational research might generate 'resource[s] for social change' (2001, p. 178), to Marcia McKenzie's consideration of 'the things we do with research'—in particular, through a range of 'more explicitly critical and political research aims and acts' (2009, p. 219). Tuck and Yang (2014, p. 223) have pointed out that 'the ethical standards of the academic industrial complex' don't 'always do enough to ensure that social science research is deeply ethical, meaningful or useful for the individual or community being researched'—and we have considered what another mode of ethics and use might look like. Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly, in their recent book *Anti-Racist Scholar Activism*, situate the notion of 'useful' research within the 'anti-racist-scholar-activist tradition'; work can be considered 'useful if it helps to empower communities of resistance and if it fuels anti-racism' (p. 72). They use the word *usefulness* to 'describe that which serves 'practical ends' that are shaped by the 'social standpoint and political purpose of communities of resistance' (2021, p. 72). We deliberately draw on the language of 'usefulness' because of its connection to radical politics.

At the same time, it is important to stress that shifting language to usefulness (from impact) does not necessarily mean that one escapes the tendrils of the 'academic industrial complex' and its accompanying histories, power relations and theories of change. This is illustrated by Sara Ahmed's pointed examination of the 'magical and mundane' effects of the language of use (2019, p. 9)—its multi-dimensionality and double-edgedness. The ethical valences and felt experience of 'use' change across different contexts and perspectives in a research project and event; research can 'be of use' to individuals and communities involved, but individuals and communities can also, simultaneously,

feel *used* by researchers and universities. Deliberately working with the language of ‘use’ is an attempt to gesture to the ever-present risk of research reproducing instrumental and extractive forms of research (see Leboiron, 2021; Tynan, 2021), even when attempting to disrupt them (see also Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2019; Patel, 2016; Moodie & Fricker, 2023).

In telling our stories about attempting to enact ‘useful’ research, we have asked: What are our responsibilities to the communities we are researching with? What does it mean to work within social arrangements that tend towards self-responsibilisation and impact? How do we avoid research that is extractive or that contributes to entrenching marginalisation? How do we offer our skills to communities in ways that complement their work for social change, without reifying a dominant understanding of the researcher as ‘expert’ or ‘saviour’? Who decides what ‘outputs’ of research are ‘useful’, and who benefits from their uses?

Storied responses to these questions speak to the ethical, political and methodological perplexities and potentiality of research. We seek to avoid neat, stitched up accounts, instead illustrating the ongoing work of struggling with the tensions, risks and potential of research that is engaged and answerable (Patel, 2016) to communities, even while we are positioned within settler colonial research institutions that commodify, extract and oppress. The stories, each written in a unique reflective mode, wrestle with what it might mean for research to be ‘useful’, and the sometimes unintended consequences of ‘useful’ research. We are all engaged with working with communities in different ways; some of the stories’ authorship configurations draw attention to processes of collaborative knowledge production. Molla considers how attempts to raise awareness and spread knowledge publicly of African Australian struggles carry risks of racist backlash that may increase harm to communities. Mayes et al. look at how researching with activist communities raises questions of whether the time burden of the research is useful to their struggle. Welch et al. explore tensions between university impact agendas that may call for efficiency and neat outcomes while useful work often involves ongoing tensions that universities may not recognise. Rudolph et al. reflect on a process of inviting community to test a theory and its usefulness to them within an institution that recognises risks to some people but not others. Rowe engages the question of who has the power to steer the usefulness of research and use research to build a victory narrative. Windle thinks through what the repurposing of funding enabled for community and how collective action contributed to research usefulness in a Brazilian case. These stories are followed by a response from Fazal Rizvi, who troubles the concept of impact as used in universities and highlights how the six stories open up space to wrestle more fully with the ongoing questions about what makes research ‘useful’. This paper illustrates the challenges and possibilities of doing research that aims to be of use for the communities with which it is undertaken. We seek to spark further conversations about researcher accountability and answerability, and to nurture critical enactments of responsibility that enable alternatives to a dominant impact discourse.

## Doing scholarly advocacy: reflections on rationales and the risks of being useful

Tebeje Molla

Engaged scholarship goes beyond generating knowledge for its own sake. It emphasises the active involvement of researchers in addressing real-world issues and collaborating with communities to produce meaningful outcomes (Cann & Demeulenaere, 2020). In this regard, equity research in education has greater usefulness when it is attuned to the circumstances of those at the periphery of society, offering tangible benefits that directly impact their lives. However, engaged scholarship is not without its risks.

In a recently completed project, I investigated higher education participation among refugee-background African-heritage youth. The study used a multi-method inquiry approach (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015) that combined critical inquiry and quantitative data to shed light on the educational attainment of African refugee integration. I generated data through interviews with young people and equity practitioners at schools and universities, policy document reviews, and statistical information requests from government agencies. The findings of the study highlight the group's policy invisibility, the low success rate in higher education and the experience of racial Othering.

Beyond scholarly publications and communications, what do we do with our knowledge of disadvantage, discrimination or domination? As Boyer (1996) noted, when we take the scholarship of engagement seriously, we use research and knowledge 'in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems' (p. 11). The scholarship of engagement entails creating, integrating, applying and disseminating knowledge to address practical social issues. Scholarly advocacy is transformative in intent. Evidence-based advocacy can help demystify and challenge unwarranted assumptions about persisting inequalities in society. To advocate is to work on behalf of those on the margins of society. Scholarly advocacy work is guided by the idea that once sufficiently robust evidence is available, it can be used to advocate for change in *policy* and *practice*. Having said that, engaged scholarship is an ethical commitment—the researcher should 'respect social reality and not distort it for short-term partisan purposes' (Bello, 2008, p. 88).

I engaged in advocacy in two ways. First, in many instances, after the interview sessions, I spent time advising how my participants could strategise their responses to racial discrimination. Following disturbing accounts of experiences of racism, I discussed with participants practical measures they should take when they face racial discrimination. Second, to raise awareness about the challenges African youth encounter in society, I wrote commentaries to *The Conversation*, appeared on local community radio (SBS/Amharic), gave interviews to journalists at *The Australian and Educational Review* and published in professional outlets such as *The TAFE Teacher* and *Research Professional News*. I also used social media to disseminate my commentaries. The advocacy work aimed to unmask the structural roots underpinning disadvantage experienced by African refugee youth.

My public-facing engagement draws on two rationales. First, I recognise that ensuring that research findings benefit participants and their communities is an ethical expectation. According to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, justice is a key principle guiding studies involving human participants. The National Statement underlines the importance of ensuring *distributive* and *procedural justice* in human research: ‘While benefit to humankind is an important result of research, it also matters that benefits of research are achieved through just means, are distributed fairly, and involve no unjust burdens’ (NHMRC, 2018, p. 9). In other words, research benefits should be gained through fair and upright practices, aligning with ethical standards and principles. Relatedly, ethical research is not extractive; it does not extract data and run away, with little or no commitment to the voices and benefits of the participants (Hooks, 1990). Ethical research uses the stories of the participants to generate benefits for them.

Second, my research is informed by a critical theory of society that encourages public-facing scholarly engagement. Critical theory assumes that existing relations and power dynamics are not ‘givens to be verified’ but social constructions that reflect the interests of powerful members of society (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 244). Accordingly, the role of the critical social researcher is to faithfully reflect reality from the situation and perspective of the disadvantaged. In essence, critical theory challenges what Bourdieu (2000) refers to as a ‘socially weightless’ mode of thought that is ‘so far removed from ordinary dynamics of oppression that ultimately its own validity and normative relevance is thrown into question’ (McNay, 2012, p. 235). Knowledge generated through equity research should raise the consciousness of the disadvantaged about the structural roots of their positions and provide alternative possibilities for an improved future. Hence, seen from a critical theory perspective, scholarship engagement aims at *raising awareness* about unjust inequalities in society, *empowering* people who live with disadvantages, and *influencing* policy actions.

Making efforts to place one’s research in service to social change is not without a challenge. I learned this the hard way. In 2019, based on the preliminary findings of my research, I wrote a piece for *The Conversation*. The core message of the article was that poor educational outcomes of refugee-background African-heritage students could be attributable to their traumatic life course and racial stigma at school. The reaction shocked me. In rejecting racism as a problem, many readers reacted in a racist way. Perhaps due partly to my social location as a researcher, I did not see that reaction coming. The editors spent half of the day deleting hostile comments and finally closed the comments section within 8 h (although it was supposed to remain open for 72 h). Here are some of the comments I had captured before the editors deleted them:

Who are you to come into this country and dictate to its people what they should think and what they should say.

Australia does not need Africans.

If they don’t like Australia then they can go back to Africa. Nobody’s forcing them to stay here. The reason why Africans cannot complete degrees or enter university is because of low IQ. Let’s not beat about the bush. Low IQ is the problem, not Australia.

These and other hostile responses may imply that doing racism is more acceptable than discussing it as a social ill. Even more worrisomely, talking about the problem in public can cause further harm. But I am convinced that engaged scholarship is too important to refrain from. Denial makes it easy to evade responsibility (and perpetuates the problem)—it needs to be challenged. Critical research is useful to challenge the status quo and effect change.

## Dissonant temporalities for making change in research with climate justice activists

**Eve Mayes with Natasha Abhayawickrama, Sophie Chiew, Netta Maiava and Dani Villafaña**

The mass scale of the 2018–2019 School Strikes for Climate suggests the felt urgency for climate justice among many school-aged students. This story narrates some of our early discussions<sup>5</sup> of co-researching with young people engaged in climate justice activism, in the project: *Striking Voices: Australian school-age student climate justice activism*. We acknowledge the project's First Nations Critical Reference Group and Stakeholder Reference Group for challenging and enriching our understanding of time, capacity and the potential for research to be 'useful'. We purposely leave open-ended some of these temporal and ethical tensions that we narrate, to encourage further conversation.

Early in 2022, Eve met with three members of the Partnerships Working Group of a youth-led climate justice network; co-researcher Natasha was a member of this working group. This consultative meeting about the research design had been rescheduled a few times because of the urgencies of planning election-related climate actions. The 'intensified' and 'compressed' timeframes of activist organising had necessarily taken precedence over the more expansive timescales of a multi-year research project (cf. Nairn et al., 2021, p. 14).

When we met on Zoom, we discussed different possibilities for the network to partner with the research project, and/or for those in the network to engage in co-research. Eve invited reflections on the prompts: 'Something I like', 'Something I'm not sure about/don't like' and 'Other ideas/thoughts' about the preliminary project design. One person wrote: 'capacity—time pressures', and verbally explained the issue of 'time pressures' for young people when juggling studying, activist

<sup>5</sup> These include early consultative conversations before forming the research team, within the research team, as well as research team members' conversations with the project's First Nations Critical Reference Group and Stakeholder Reference Group. While preparing the project's ethics application, we asked those involved in the First Nations Critical Reference Group and the Stakeholder Reference Group how this project could be of 'benefit' and 'use' for the work of Healing Country, First Nations justice and climate justice, and talked through ethical considerations for methods. We invited verbal responses to the following questions: *How would you like to see research contribute to the work of those pursuing climate justice? What kind of research is relevant/ useful/ of benefit? What might be some important ethical considerations for the research project?*

organising, part-time work and then, the invitation to partner in research design, conduct, analysis and writing. They explained that young people are already overstretched with schoolwork and activism. They felt that young people will prioritise their activist organising and its urgent demands over the sometimes longer game of research. This, and other conversations about ‘capacity-building’, led to a call for Research Associates through various networks, and the recruitment of the four paid members of the research team as Research Associates (Natasha, Sophie, Netta and Dani).

Yet, employing young people as members of the research team does not solve the challenges of temporal ‘capacity’, nor necessarily mean that the research will be ‘useful’ for them and activist networks. Research remains entangled with capitalist and ‘colonial institutions, temporalities and incentive structures’ (Theriault et al., 2020, p. 902), even as the team is attempting to craft ways to ‘fleetingly escape’ these dominant structures (Rowley et al., 2022, p. 2). Co-researchers’ paid hours are constrained by funding budgets; they are still juggling multiple jobs, study, activist organising, and personal lives. Certain research-related tasks have, therefore, not seemed to feel as ‘useful’ to members of the project team as others. For example, Dani questioned the extensive time taken to achieve 100% in a multiple-choice institutional ethics quiz as evidence of her understanding of human research ethics principles for the ethics application. In shaping up the project design, we have collectively reflected on a comment made by long-term campaigner James Whelan during one Stakeholder Reference Group meeting, responding to an invitation to share an ethical consideration: ‘An ethical consideration is not wasting an activist’s time’. We have discussed what it might look like to not ‘waste an activist’s time’, and the need to be in ongoing conversation about the outputs that will support the work that climate justice organisers are already doing.

The project team has also been considering what it might look like to move ‘at the speed of trust’. This phrase was used by a long-term climate justice campaigner at the online webinar launch of Sapna South Asian Climate Solidarity’s report *Why North–South Intersectionality Matters for Climate Justice: Perspectives of South Asian Australian Youth Climate Activists* (Talukdar, 2022). In introducing the report, Ruchira Talukdar quoted Kyle Whyte: ‘People who perpetrate colonialism often imagine that their wrongful actions are defensible because they are responding to some crisis’ (2020, p. 52). Whyte (2020) demonstrates the continuing colonialist logics of urgency that perpetuate injustices in contemporary climate activism: for example, through rushing towards ‘fast’ clean energy solutions that dispossess and desecrate the lands and waters of Indigenous peoples across the planet. Responding to the Sapna report, a long-term climate justice campaigner reflected on how climate campaigns are often designed with urgency, not doing slow relational work with and in service to communities first and worst affected—specifically, First Nations, Pacific peoples and communities of colour. They reflected on the need for ‘moving at the speed of trust’ in climate justice campaigning and solidarity work,

paraphrasing adrienne maree brown's words in *Emergent Strategy* (Brown, 2017, p. 42).<sup>6</sup>

We have been reflecting, since, on how research also frequently operates with default colonialist logics of urgency and crisis: compelled to identify an urgent 'gap' in need of useful intervention (see Tynan & Bishop, 2022) and driven by harried temporal relations to move quickly to produce outcomes within funding timelines. We are still asking: how do we acknowledge, and be accountable for, the dissonant, and sometimes incommensurable, agendas, timescales and expectations of 'usefulness' between researchers and activist groups, as well as within and between different grassroots groups? How might we nurture different modes of relating to time, to each other, and to our ancestors and future generations, in and through research?

## **Necessarily inefficient: can educational research speak back to institutional knowledge hierarchies?**

**Rosie Welch, Ben Liu, Rachel Couper, Iris Duhn**

*'Are you still going with that project... who has time for that?'*

After a check-in conversation with a senior academic supervisor 6 years ago, their rhetorical words echo. Rosie had been telling them about some shifts in the plan for the delivery of a 'bushfoods' workshop she was reorganising from the previous years' iteration. Rosie was proposing a more timetable friendly field trip to the 'Aboriginal Garden' on campus with a guest Elder, in an attempt to 'Indigenise' (following e.g. Madden, 2015) an Initial Teacher Education food and nutrition health education unit. While the senior academic had insinuated that Rosie would be better off pursuing a less time-consuming teaching and research initiative within the academy, she was still going with 'that' project. It is a project engaging with teacher education and the complex settler-colonial relations of knowledge and culture on unceded land in relation to curriculum, plants, place and pedagogy.

The authors of this story came together 3 years ago as education and architecture academics with a botanical gardens education manager to record a series of dialogical encounters that discussed the educational challenges and benefits of botanical gardens as sites of learning. In doing this work, we attempt to inhabit a 'border epistemology' or pluriversal politics, as referred to by Escobar (2020), which demands pause. In rethinking the everyday practices and politics of the university or botanical gardens, the complexity of colonial settler histories as manifest in the present become visible. This 'whole practice' (Escobar, 2020, p. 27) of working with the real, the possible and the political helps to make sense of the affective and embodied decision making in Indigenous curriculum and program

<sup>6</sup> When Eve checked in with this campaigner, they credited writer, activist and facilitator adrienne maree brown for this phrase. brown, in turn, writes that this phrase is 'communications strategist Mervyn Marcano's remix of Stephen Covey's "speed of trust" concept' (Brown, 2017, p. 42, footnote 5).

inclusions and exclusions over time. The ‘real’ is best considered in plurality or that there are multiple reals that operate through daily rituals that allow cultivating interexisting of different peoples and knowledges, such as re-localisation, re-communication, re-autonomy, re-design across the different interactions or micro-pedagogical moments with diverse others. The ‘possible’ entails imagining other worlds ‘significantly different from those on offer by capitalism, the state, the media, and most expert institutions’ (Escobar., 2020, p. 17). The ‘political’ is about practices of creating a particular world where action is required in discursively shaping and highlighting the pluriverse (in this case, of plant knowledge).

Gardens can offer unique social, cultural and ecological benefits across the human lifespan yet what they offer educationally is often assumed (Earl and Thompson, 2020). In one of our dialogical encounters, the education manager described the most popular programs:

Our Indigenous programs. They probably make up about—close to 50% of all our programming... there are questions about whether or not we’re well placed to be teaching areas of Indigenous culture, which we traditionally had permissions to but with recognised Traditional Owner groups. We are experts in plant knowledge and horticulture and not necessarily cultural knowledge.

Botanical gardens in this account can be theorised as sites where ‘the real, the possible and the political are all joined at the hip’ (Escobar, 2020, pp. 3–4). Extractivist tensions and histories shape the way knowledge is organised and how hierarchies of colonial scientific endeavour have ‘involved a process of both extraction and erasure: the extraction of local knowledge, plants, information and labour; and an erasure of Indigenous knowledge and ecological practices’ (Gray & Sheikh, 2021, p. 16). In the process of identifying plants via scientific botany with a Latin name in a universalised system, local knowledge and language associated with plants were erased. At the same time, educators in the present, seek out botanical gardens, as did Rosie with a preservice teacher workshop, for Indigenous cultural curriculum delivery via plants. While many commentators and educationalists assume gardens have educational links to concepts such as environmental literacy and Indigenous knowledge, the ‘real’ and the ‘possible’ of this culturally, are highly situational. The way these sites educationally account for varied cultural histories remains ambiguous and in need of methodological approaches that engage with the cultural complexity (Williams, 2018).

In another of our dialogical encounters, the education manager shared that:

Learning and education teams are often ... breaking into new areas of conversation that the organisation need[s] to have... so we’re responding sometimes to schools and then slowly dragging the rest of the organisation into those conversations, sometimes very slowly and maybe not even... the education teams are often the ones having those difficult and culturally shaping conversations... Traditionally, it’s been people in the organisation saying, ‘I will hand that over to the Indigenous learning facilitators’. This year; it was the learning facilitators that came back and said: ‘well, actually, Reconciliation Week is actually

about two sides of the story. It's about two different cultures coming together and reconciling. So it's not just about us as Indigenous identified staff talking'.

These dialogical quotes speak to the way educational work can be undervalued for the role it plays in shaping daily exchanges in relation to cultural knowledge in a botanical garden and university institution. Scientific botanical experts are at the top of the knowledge–power hierarchy in botanical gardens. While there are recent moves afoot to rename plants with Indigenous names in botanical gardens (Scherer, 2023), from our dialogical encounters it is educational officers who are doing complex 'invisible' cultural work. One complexity is that Indigenous identified education officers are often working on non-traditional lands to their cultural heritage. Following pluriversal ways of knowing, it is the educators' (Indigenous or non-Indigenous identifying) labour that is at the intersection of the real, the possible and the political.

The usefulness of this work is in the relational. As it continues to unfold, we continue to engage with local communities to develop dialogue and practices that are useful to a better pedagogy of plants, place and people. One 4th-year Bachelor of Education student reflected after a botanical gardens field trip: 'It made me realise how little I knew about Indigenous foods and culture. I learnt a lot about how they use the land to cultivate food as well as the use of land objects to create their own artwork'. We are collaborating to navigate how and who has expertise in doing the work of embedding Indigenous knowledge and cultures within garden institutions and land-based learning programs. While this work is currently unfunded and 'inefficient' our institutions both enable and constrain the usefulness of this work in research and practice. The mundane and invisible work of colonial gardens in education is about possibilities of the real and the political for valuing educational research for the role it plays in social engagements that are better attuned to a multiplicity of often intangible cultural histories and cultures.

## **Is theory useful to communities? Attempts at addressing the carceral industrial complex**

**Sophie Rudolph, with Al Fricker, Archie Thomas, Menasik Dewanyang, Hayley McQuire, Sophie Hashimoto-Benfatto, Michelle Spisbah, Zach Smith, Tarneen Onus-Browne**

In this story, we reflect on testing a theory with members of school communities. The theory was developed from within the 'academic industrial complex' (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 223; see also Grande, 2018) to address the 'carceral industrial complex' (Meiners, 2016). We ran a workshop with eight First Nations and African Australian students and four teachers from two schools and asked them to test a theory of carceral logics for understanding racialised school discipline and exclusion.

Two weeks before our workshop we realised the institutional need to lodge a risk assessment form. While planning for potential risks is appropriate, the absurdity of this exercise was also noted, when every day we ask some students to come to learn

in schools that are hazardous and built that way (see Bishop, 2022; Sriprakash et al., 2022; Welch, 1988). Places where students face risks to their sense of self, sense of value, sense of history and sense of emotional safety (see Moodie et al., 2019; Uptin, 2021). Which risks are recognised by education institutions and how risk is conceptualised is central to understanding how school discipline and exclusion operates.

The workshop explored how schooling structures are set up to target certain students for discipline and exclusion because of links between the processes of the settler colonial state and its institutions. We wanted to think with students and teachers about these issues and presented them with a theory bringing together literature on the carceral state and literature on the settler colonial state (see Rudolph, 2023). We explored how the settler colonial state is founded on, and invested in, practices of racialised discipline and exclusion. We proposed five ‘carceral logics’ that operate in schools as an extension of the settler state, these were: containment, control, policing, surveillance and exclusion. We then asked participants to test this theory by applying it to some hypothetical scenarios of racialised discipline and exclusion in schools. We wanted to know if the theory was useful in understanding what was happening in the scenario and if the theory needed modification.

The participants suggested adding some more logics. However, through the discussion they thought that perhaps the additions were more like tactics, so they settled on the original logics of containment, control, policing, surveillance and exclusion, and tactics such as shaming, deficit thinking/relating, overlooking the real problem, judgement, busy work and conformity to a predetermined norm. We then asked participants to suggest what kinds of anti-carceral logics would be needed in schools to address racialised exclusion and to help school communities feel better connected and supportive. They formulated a range of anti-carceral logics, including negotiation, communication, strong relationships, student agency, listening, choice, time, joy, critical thinking, link learning to student interests, enabling options for ‘cooling down’ and re-entering. We then asked the groups to return to the scenarios and apply a couple of these anti-carceral logics to the situation—what would happen, what would people say or do differently, guided by anti-carceral logics?

In our reflections, following the workshop, we noted that the use of carceral logics in schools conditions students and teachers so they have less capacity for critical thinking. In the workshop, we noticed how the students were sharing their views and experiences and were engaged with the theory and exercises. It seemed useful to them. The teachers were much harder to engage and more resistant to testing the theory. They were anxious about representing schools as connected to prisons and contributing to carceral logics. As an outcome, they struggled to listen to the students at times, seeming to want to instruct or correct them.

We reflected on our purpose for the workshop, which was to build solidarities that might address issues of discipline and exclusion and to think differently together about challenges in schools that sometimes feel insurmountable. We wondered, therefore, about creating scenarios that connected directly with how teachers are impacted by carceral logics too, to help teachers reflect on their position within a historically charged system that works on all of us in different ways. And then perhaps open them up to imagining ways to create different relations within the system. We also recognised though, how hard it can be to feel

empowered to effect change in a system that is complex and where carceral logics are very powerful. We wondered about the need to build better coalitions and collectives to enable this kind of change work, but also what was possible at a smaller, more local or individual level.

Working with students and teachers in this workshop, we learned about how theory can be useful to communities but also how it can be engaged with, modified, tested, resisted and developed. We also learned about how being critical of the systems we work within can be difficult, uncomfortable, slow and unsettling work. As Irene Watson argues, the connections between justice for Aboriginal people, divestment from domination and freedom for all are important for seeing the possibility for growth:

Perhaps the only possibility for an Aboriginality to grow is in a violence free environment, one that is not disabled by an Australian hegemony. Perhaps there is no possibility for growth of any peoples when all of the space is held by hegemonic forces that enable rampant and ravenous development of our natural world. (2009, p. 6)

Considering the limits of the risk management form for the workshop, we reflected on what risks we needed to take to address the hazards produced by institutional racism and make space for research to be wrestled with, and potentially be useful, to communities. What risky endeavours to unsettle white-settler hegemonies might be necessary? Who might be at risk? The white, settler system? Those of us who benefit from that system? Those who experience the backlash of that system? How might our research support these kinds of risky endeavours in ways that centre solidarity and collective care and open us up to more just futures?

## Power-geometries and research: the usefulness of victory narratives

### Emma Rowe

In this short reflection I consider the notion of the 'victory narrative' (Vaughan, 2004) in relation to researchers' engagements and entanglements within politics of power. Rewind to 10 years ago: I was undertaking my PhD by researching different forms of educational activism. I was researching groups of people lobbying the state government for a brand new 'local' public high school.

The campaigners were mainly composed of university educated, white, professionally employed individuals. The neighbourhood was located roughly ten kilometres from the city of Melbourne, a traditionally working-class neighbourhood described by one of the participants:

In the 1930s it was called the Birmingham of the South, they really pride themselves on being this sort of manufacturing industrial centre you know, they were the Midlands of Australia, of Melbourne . . . But now it's *completely different*. (Interview: italics indicate emphasis).

The historical imaginary of the neighbourhood, as a community of blue-collar migrant workers from the local factories and abattoirs, was deeply enmeshed into its 'new' gentrified cosmopolitan identity. The once-distasteful factories were converted to hip 'warehouses' (with million dollar-plus price-tags) as the historical character was translated to currency within the gentrified community, and 'power-geometries' renegotiated (Massey, 1999).

I attended their first meeting held at their local pub, advertised on their website as public and open. After the meeting, I subsequently rushed to explain why I was there, and what I was hoping to do—and a lengthy negotiation process ensued over the next few months, with several face-to-face meetings. To cut a long story short, I was generously granted access to attend their events, take notes and request interviews.

This experience was complicated and fraught at times. Karen Vaughan (2004) describes something similar, in her role of researching an alternative school facing forced closure in New Zealand. What she describes is an uncomfortable and disquieting experience in which she struggles with conflicting pressures, demands and inner ethical conflicts pertaining to the agenda or purpose of her research. The fundamental conflict that is evoked is: *what is the purpose of my research?* Vaughan's perception of purpose is very different to her participants, and she writes that 'the imperative for me to produce a victory narrative about the school was quite strong' (Vaughan, 2004, p. 393). Like Vaughan, I felt pressure to produce a victory narrative about the campaign, or at least *help* the campaigners achieve victory.

Our research may never be useful in the way that communities foresee or imagine. We are not there as a paid consultant, even though our participants may expect us to be (Avelar et al., 2021). My research purpose was very different to the campaigners, in that my purpose was not determining whether they needed a new school or not; I saw it as a sociological inquiry about public schooling and how it is struggled over in the context of marketisation. I argued that, as the public school is privatised, commercialised and differentiated within the market, the proxy of public schooling as universally equitable, politically left and democratic, is rendered problematic (see, Rowe, 2020).

Power is at the centre of our sociological inquiry and imagination, but the concept of social justice is fought over and struggled for (Fraser, 2013). There is a consistent struggle at play for resources and power. For instance, in this study, I was researching parents who were campaigning for a public school broadly regarded as equitable and democratic. But, while these voices were generally quieter, parents from the surrounding neighbourhoods expressed fear it would negatively affect their own limited schooling resources while excluding their children. Local campaigns for public schooling, while clearly retaining merit and usefulness, find themselves caught up in instrumentalist perspectives of school choice in a competitive market. These campaigns illuminate the tensions in arguing for the public school as a neutral site of social justice, rather than an engagement with consumption practices which typically reify hierarchical race and class relations. In this instance, the imagined community is clearly defined, and limited.

Whereas, fast forward 10 years: I am currently researching venture philanthropy in public education. I regularly speak to highly influential people I would describe as

'policy entrepreneurs', often with a background in the finance sector, they are active in education policy reform in the name of improving educational equity and social justice. They bring sizeable money and significant connections. In their own words, 'we are determining where the debate [about this reform] lands' (interview with x, 2022). Communities envisage themselves as actively engaged in public schooling, but the power differentials, access to resources and status leveraging are radically different. This emphasises the question of power as at the centre of our sociological imagination, both in the epistemological and empirical sense. When researching communities and 'imagined communities', we should ask: *what is power* and how do we conceptualise and theorise power (Fahey & Kenway, 2006)?

The sociological researcher needs to be aware of pressures to craft the 'victory narrative'. We must maintain criticality of not only the sociological structure and power relations we are critiquing, but also ourselves as researchers entangled within these power relations. There is a need for a nuanced lens and to reject binary positions, at times: on one hand we want to avoid being the hired hand, the purchased consultant; while on the other, we cannot appropriate another's experience for our own gain, perpetuating forms of extractive or exploitive research that do not respect our participants' autonomy and voice. To critique the usefulness of research is complex, for us and our participants; Fahey and Kenway (2006, p. 164) point to the translation of our research as a way to enable 'reciprocal intelligibility'. Such an approach offers a potential way forward.

## **Building reciprocal community relationships that are useful in and outside of research**

**Joel Windle**

In this story, I present some ways in which a reciprocal university–community relationship was developed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, by virtue of investments beyond traditional research activities and of an unusually strong level of community organisation whose leadership saw multiple uses for researchers willing to take on some non-traditional roles. The context is a project examining community-based and activist literacy practices (Duncan, 2020; Silva & Lee, 2021) with a view to generate new models of classroom pedagogy. In its initial conception, the project sought to be useful to schools, through more responsive approaches that could empower students as citizens. In highlighting and valuing community literacy practices, the project also sought to be useful in destigmatising the cultural and communicative practices of communities who live in *favelas*.

Two conditions under which this research was undertaken shifted its sense of usefulness from that typical in many research relationships. First, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in funds intended for conference travel being repurposed. Repurposing included payment of community journalists to produce articles relating to local issues that could be subsequently used in schools. A further effect of the pandemic was to provide conditions for research participants from different countries and

localities to undertake collaborative activities online by virtue of the greater familiarity with tools such as Zoom, which became a part of daily life for many.

A second unusually helpful condition was the density and networked nature of community organisation in Rio de Janeiro. When there are established and emerging leaderships who are looking for allies and support mechanisms, it is easy for university-based actors to negotiate these. Other, long-running research and community development projects in favelas in Rio de Janeiro provide models, particularly as undertaken by Daniel Silva and his colleagues in the Alemão Complex of favelas (Lopes et al., 2018; Silva & Lee, 2021; Windle et al., 2020).

My first contact with residents from the Viradouro Favela Complex came through the editors of Rio on Watch ([rio0onwatch.org.br](http://rio0onwatch.org.br)). Rio on Watch is a not-for-profit organisation set up initially to counter negative media representations of *favelas* in the local and international press. After we initially set up a partnership based on the university research project supporting local *favela* residents in the municipality of Niterói, in the greater metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, to publish pieces based on their daily experiences, I was contacted regarding a piece written by a resident of Viradouro. The piece was about a military police base that had been set up at the entrance to the *favela*, ostensibly to protect local road works, which was harassing residents. The police occupation was the catalyst for local organising to protect residents' rights, one action being seeking media attention.

Alessandro Conceição, the author of the piece denouncing police abuses in Niterói, had previously sought to tell this story through local media outlets, and had been knocked back. Eventually, he was able to gain interest from the Spanish newspaper *El País*, and then through a contact made at a meeting of *favela*-based organisations in the Marais region, was able to gain attention from Rio on Watch. I interviewed Alessandro for our research, and his sister Eloanah Gentil<sup>7</sup> also subsequently wrote two articles for Rio on Watch and participated in a research interview. Eloanah was particularly clear about her strategies to use different linguistic registers to gain traction with different audiences—using *favela*-ese to speak to fellow residents and organisations, and using NGO-ese to speak to outside organisations who might offer support in countering the police abuses.

Both Alessandro and Eloanah were long-term participants in the Rio de Janeiro Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed, an arts-based activist organisation founded by Pedro Boal and inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972). Through this organisation, they were experienced in organising and gaining attention for political interventions, the latest of which was the Viradouro Cultural-Artistic Occupation (OCA)—set up in direct opposition to the Military Police Occupation. OCA, from soon after its inception, began collaborating with the university research project, by providing speakers for online forums, and through the joint organisation of English language classes provided at a local community centre by students from the university. Other groups connected to these activities included human rights defender groups, and representatives from the Niterói municipal

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<sup>7</sup> Eloanah Gentil prefers to be identified and it is important that her community leadership and partnership is recognised, rather than being erased as a consequence of de-identification.

assembly—such as Walkyria Nichteroy, who developed a pamphlet on what to do when stopped by the police.

The involvement of outside actors such as the university and municipal council offered material support, increased capacity for fundraising, collaborators in organising community services and, most importantly, a high-visibility protection from police violence at events organised by OCA. Although this protection is never fully certain, the chance of negative repercussions if police violence reaches university-sanctioned actors is far greater than when it reaches *favela* residents alone, for whom violence is considered to be a routine feature of daily existence and not particularly newsworthy.

Joint actions between the university and OCA resulted in school students producing their own guides on what to do when stopped by police, or in other situations where their rights might be violated. It has also helped to strengthen the connections between civil society actors already involved in actions in other parts of Rio de Janeiro. As a researcher, I also decided to undertake courses offered by the Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed, becoming a student of Eloanah and Alessandro.

More broadly, I want to make two points about shifting the orientations of research usefulness. Firstly, research usefulness is increased when institutional resources can be dedicated to community needs beyond what appear to be immediate research operational purposes. That is to say, wider benefits can be generated or leveraged when research resources are supplemented, repurposed or complemented by resources from other institutional activities. Secondly, research gains purchase and usefulness locally when there is a high level of organised community activity to which the research activity can add itself and enrich—in this case connections to other community organisations via *Rio on Watch*.

## Ideological framing of the uses and impact of educational research

### Fazal Rizvi

The six stories in this paper demonstrate the diversity of ways in which educational research can be useful and how the idea of usefulness can be interpreted and imagined in a wide variety of ways. Each of these stories show how the authors have attempted to think creatively about the design of their research projects, paying close attention to their potential usefulness. In each case, the projects display a deep commitment to various ethical principles such as anti-racism, environmental sustainability and social justice. The authors consider research projects to be most useful when they are driven by an activist impulse and involve the participation of the communities affected by the projects.

The authors are deeply cognisant, however, of the complex theoretical, methodological and political issues that arise in thinking more broadly, imaginatively and ethically about research driven by an activist impulse. This is especially the case in institutional research settings defined by the 'industrial academic complex'. The managerial culture that now dominates the modern university privileges the idea of impact of research, defined in highly instrumental terms invariably linked

to producing commercial outcomes, enhancing institutional prestige or meeting national interests. This conceptualisation of the idea of impact invariably affects the ways in which the potential uses of research are envisaged, with institutional drivers minimising the value of activist research or indeed the research that does not meet the broader strategic objectives of a university.

While universities may attempt to broaden ideas of impact to social and cultural considerations, these are often not privileged ahead of commercial and strategic outcomes. This is not a situation specific to Australia and this became clear in my role as a panel member of the Hong Kong's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2015 and then again in 2022. In RAE 2015, universities in Hong Kong were encouraged for the first time to address in their submissions how their research was impactful. Since they were not given any specific explanation of what kind of impact was valued by the Universities Grants Commission (UGC), the universities paid little attention to the ways in which impact could be measured. In this way, the distinction between use and impact of research was not treated as being relevant to defining the quality of research.

Seven years later, the UGC tightened its expectations. It provided the universities a clearer account of the criteria of what kind of impact it was seeking. It also demanded evidence of how the impact was measured. Mindful of the high stakes associated with RAE, Hong Kong's eight universities followed the guidelines as slavishly as they could, describing the potential uses of their research in terms of their measurable impact. They sought to demonstrate how their research had the potential for commercialisation and how it contributed to solving problems that were prioritised by the Hong Kong Government. The focus on measurability also meant that the research projects that had indeterminate, uncertain or complex outcomes were largely ignored, even if they had the potential to contribute in the longer run to the realisation of major public goods.

In examining the submissions made by the educational faculties in Hong Kong's RAE 2022, it became evident to me that they highlighted only those research projects that had the potential to be converted into marketable products or enhance the possibilities of collaboration with state agencies. Overlooked were the projects, of which I had some prior knowledge, that viewed the uses of research in terms of their potential for community development, human welfare and public interest.

This growing focus on the importance of impact around the world, in my view, is highly ideological, especially when multifarious uses of educational research are only valued when they are defined in mostly narrow instrumental terms. It is becoming increasingly clear that this limited technicist understanding of the uses of research, when assessed in terms of the imperatives of impact, will further marginalise issues that involve major ethical and political issues and remain central to education.

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