Researching in-betweens: Blurring the boundaries of mainstream and marginal education research

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Introduction

> We are in desperate need of new concepts…in this new educational environment that privileges a single positivist research model with its transcendent rationality and objectivity and accompanying concepts such as randomisation, replicability, generalizability, bias, and so forth – one that has marginalised subjugated knowledges and done harm at all levels of education, and one that many educators have resisted with some success for the last fifty years (St. Pierre, 2004, p. 286).

In education research the troubling binary of the mainstream-marginal divergence has created new possibilities for undertaking careful and considered research within various contexts. It has opened up research opportunities that are neither mainstream, nor marginal, but something else altogether – the in-between spaces. It is here that we find some of the most exciting potential for difference to be explored and affirmed in education research.

The central motive of bringing together the contributions for this book was to interrogate why there is a need to investigate the mainstream and its margins, but also to map what is occurring in between. Education research, and social science research more broadly, is suffering from a mainstreamed scientism, ruled by a belief in a metanarrative of unified epistemology and methodology (St. Pierre & Roulston, 2006) that cripples thinking, doing and being otherwise. We[1] feel that there is a need to trouble the dominant binary of mainstream and marginal thinking in education research, by bringing forth the multiple and varied 'in-betweens' of contemporary research.

We are interested in exploring some of the numerous issues, definitions and perspectives around contemporary, accepted and alternative philosophies, viewpoints, concepts and research practices in the aspiration of arriving at new possibilities for research. We consider how each of these aspects might better speak to and learn from the other – offering spaces and opportunities for connecting, rupturing and blurring beliefs about popular and unconventional viewpoints of education research, common and uncharacteristic practices, similarities, differences and gaps - to extend understanding about such research, and about the work and lives of researchers and researched peoples.

Drawing on a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, the chapters in this book explore and challenge that which characterise research of the mainstream and the marginal, examining the related experiences of researchers and researched communities. In so doing,

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[1] 'We' is used in this chapter as a collective pronoun interchangeably for the various editors and chapter authors. While it may appear as a unified singular voice, this is not our intention. Rather, the continual reference to 'we' should be taken similarly to a narrator's lines, threading through and weaving across the broader narrative of this book.

we hope to consider new ways of seeing how these connect, overlap, and jar, revealing particular issues of concern to researchers. These issues include notions of voice, (re)presentation, data, ethics, participant/researcher roles and relationships, truth, power and knowledge.

We take up the call from Lather (1992) to disturb and disrupt "the formerly secure foundations of knowledge and understanding" (p. 88) and to *work the ruins* (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000) of education research so that we might find something that is otherwise, think anew, realise potentials that could not have been thought of using another method or process of inquiry and knowledge making.

Mainstreams, margins or the spaces in-between?

The notion of the mainstream is well-ensconced in social 'common sense'. It has been a marker of broad, mass application in many fields of research, public policy and economic schemes of production and consumption. However, in recent times this notion of the mainstream is proving troublesome as the elements hitherto considered marginal, marginalised and margins creep further and further toward the middle. Troubling the dominance of mainstream as a focus for research is something that we hope to take further, by sharing some of the spaces in-between where researchers are working.

At the heart of these considerations lie the questions of what education and education research is, who it is for, and who gets to decide. McGregor (2009) claims that "neoliberal and neoconservative forces see education as the producer of obedient, and 'moral' *human capital* in opposition to critical educators who regard it as the facilitator of *human possibility*" (p. 355). We suggest, along with the contributing authors that perhaps spaces in-between might be found, where socially just research practices and methodologies inform education in ways that enhance the potential for young people to live fulfilling lives.

As Deleuze (1991) reminds us, "the problem of truth must be presented and stated as the critical problem of subjectivity itself" (p. 86). Epistemologies of researchers and researched are powerful shaping forces of how truths become constructed and (re)presented as authentic, meaningful education research. We are influenced in how we undertake research by the moral, aesthetic, cultural and social norms that both constrain our research and, at the same time, provide necessary frameworks for making sense of the experiences, thoughts and images that we encounter.

Yet Foucault (1994b) cautions that "it is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (p. 133). This is a position supported by St. Pierre (1997), who claims that "knowledge is contingent and bound up more with power than with truth" (p. 175). We must be careful that our knowledge creation is ethical, considerate and hopefully somewhat pragmatic.

This book engages critically with issues of ethics, disclosure, and representation. It also contends with and seeks to contribute to emerging debates around power and the positioning of researchers and participants, of the contradictory and troubling values and motivations that researchers sometimes bring in relation to participant transformation and empowerment, and the importance of research that genuinely seeks to explore voice, culture, story and identity.

Understanding the complexities of power relations is part of this book's intent. We take up Foucault's (1994a) challenge, that "in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations" (p. 329).

We acknowledge Braidotti's (2013) "dream of producing socially relevant knowledge that is attuned to basic principles of social justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalisms; the affirmation of the positivity of difference; the principles of academic freedom, anti-racism, openness to others and conviviality" (p. 11). It is our hope that this book will contribute in some way to this project through the explorations of researchers' experiences, understandings and motivations. We consider 'the researched' and notions of privilege, voice, agency, authority and authenticity. We explore the complexities of investigating minorities, majorities, boundaries and borders and the passion and experience of researchers who choose to work in these spaces and at these edges. We also examine epistemologies that appear to shape researchers' beliefs about the forms of research that are privileged and valued in educational research and theory.

Resisting the backdrop of standardisation, performativity and accountability agendas pervading governments and organisations, this book seeks to attend to the stories of real people, to understand differing landscapes, to examine culture and the human condition, and to give voice to those at the fringes of society who remain largely neglected and unheard. In this way, this book provides an overview of the many types of research being engaged in, revealing the great value of these kinds of research, the diverse motivations of researchers, and offering insight into how meaning and findings are disseminated in research and educational sectors, and back into the contexts where research takes place.

The positioning of researchers and researched groups as insiders, outsiders, border crossers, participant-researchers, and co-constructors who share power, roles and relationships is a feature of the chapters throughout this book. We hope that there are moments of what MacLure (2010) would call, *glowing data*. That is data that leap from the page and, unbounded, form new assemblages of meaning and understanding for the reader. Moving through fluid spaces is a key theme throughout the book. So is consideration of processes that support negotiation of our own and others' perspectives, knowledge and approaches to highlight the value of collaboration, voice and the relational production of knowledge. Critical to this is a keen sense of social justice and a commitment to the development of relationships and trust, to careful listening, ethics and attention to participant voices, and to the co-construction of knowledge.

We believe that it is important to unpack what is sometimes taken for granted in educational research, in order to question the foundational ontological, epistemological and philosophical positions that we bring to the work we do as researchers. Further, we believe that paradigm positioning is important to acknowledge, whether that is by buying into dominant neoliberal narratives of scientism and positivist ontologies, or perhaps shifting towards paradigms that embrace non-representational forms such as artistry, postqualitative and new materialisms. We reject the need to rely on binaries for constructing oppositional paradigms, instead suggesting that there are opportunities to move around the space and become-both/and/or/neither. Whilst this book posits that credibility and legitimacy in research is too often conflated with a 'scientific' or positivist paradigm, and that alternative positions and approaches (such as arts-based and autoethnographic approaches) are still quite marginalised

(and not beyond problematisation), we are mindful that we want to do much more than just reverse the binary opposition between disembodied knowledge and experience. Rather, we hope to interrupt and critique the binary-making process itself to explore the resilience and character of binary constructions, to disrupt and reconceptualise them, and ultimately move beyond them.

Running throughout the ensuing chapters is a strong sense of the influence on methodologies and viewpoints to get at the personal and relational, messing up the precedence of conceptual frames over participants' stories, and challenging assumptions about what counts as research, in order to blur the edges, remove boundaries and make further spaces in-between.

Structure of this book

The following chapters have been grouped loosely into three particular sections – 'researchers', 'researched', 'research methodologies' – to reflect the flows and synergies between different concepts and experiences shared by contributing authors. There are common interests and particular synergies between chapters around alternative schooling philosophies and alternative research methodologies, including the different ways in which autoethnography and forms of reflection infuse research.

Key organising questions addressed by authors include:
- Why is research about mainstreams, margins and the spaces in between important?
- How do researchers negotiate the exclusive research cultures, agendas and 'official' viewpoints that seem to permeate universities to investigate issues that matter?
- What connections, gaps and contradictions occur at the intersections between research of the mainstream and research that sits at the borderlands and margins?
- How are researchers' personal and professional understandings, beliefs and experiences about what typifies or adds value to mainstream or marginal research constructed, shared and challenged?
- How do personal and professional motivations and ideals influence researchers, their choice of projects and approaches, and contribute to outcomes?
- How do researchers manage the potential risks of speaking for others in research and perpetuating silences and generalisations, to actually give voice and power to participants?

'A palimpsest-ish challenge to consider assumptions about research and what counts as research, in order to blur the edges, remove boundaries and make further spaces in-between'

(An adaption of Ali Black and Sandra O'Dea's collaborative collage and digital work, incorporating ideas and images from across the book, Ali Black March 2014)

The six chapters that constitute the first section of the book, '*Researchers*' explore the beliefs, motivations, passions and experiences of researchers who are choosing to work in middling spaces and at the edges of these.

In Chapter 2: *Building a tapestry of knowledge in the spaces in-between: Weaving personal and collective meaning through arts-based research* researchers Ali Black and Sandra O'Dea employ arts-based methods and a call and response approach to consider how these resources and processes can offer a dwelling place for living inquiry and provide connection to affective and embodied dimensions of knowledge. They use images and narrative to represent experiences and explore those parts of their identities that are often neglected or put aside when engaging in research and academia. And, they (re) discover how the arts enable transformative encounters with personal and social issues and with dimensions of experience.

Chapter 3: *Researching the place of gratitude in the personal domain of the educator: Tales from the field* is also interested in lived experiences and narrative inquiry. Throughout her

chapter researcher Kerry Howells welcomes researcher subjectivity as part of the story being told and uses the example of gratitude to consider complexities that can be encountered when reaching and researching beyond mainstream constructs of self. This chapter highlights some of the challenges of researching the personal domain and encourages researchers to engage in deep listening to and 'dwelling with' that which they are researching.

Chapter 4 explores aspirations, opportunities and responsibilities of research teams and presents data about how an Australian university research team focused on capacity building in educational contexts built and managed individual and collective knowledge in this space. Valuing visualisation of knowledge, researchers Karl Matthews and Patrick Danaher offer a series of wordle 'knowledge maps' in their chapter *Mainstreaming margins: Analysing the knowledge of an Australian university research team.* They use these to explore the concept of mainstream and marginal knowledge spaces, and introduce implications for a spatially-based contribution to theorising mainstreams, margins and the spaces in-between.

In Chapter 5: *Where the wild things are: Sustaining practice in the loneliest place* practitioner and researcher Julie Hollitt draws on metaphors derived from the children's book 'Where the wild things are' to investigate personal/professional experiences and learning with regard to her encounters with student diversity and difference. In this provocative autoethnographic account, uncomfortable feelings and uncertainties are troubled alongside teacher practice and knowledge, and alongside learner characteristics imagined by curriculum writers and educational authorities. The benefits of being uncomfortable in the presence of widespread learner difference are considered in ways that promote thinking about relationships, connectedness and knowledge.

Offering a contemporary recasting of Aesop's fable, Chapter 6 sees teacher educator and researcher Janice Jones adopt the persona of the bat as storyteller in her chapter *Neither of the air, nor of the earth but a creature somewhere between: The researcher as traveller between worlds.* This chapter brings together narratives of her experience as an educator of pre-service teachers and as a researcher involved in participatory research within a community managed primary school. She makes transparent the ways in which boundaries and borders are internalised by educators and researchers and how educator beliefs can act as both constraining and enabling frameworks in the context of increasing bureaucratic controls of education.

Calling on concepts raised in the preceding chapter, Tao Bak examines a set of struggles encountered while embarking on his doctoral research project focused on Steiner Education. Chapter 7: *Insider/outsider research on Steiner education in Australia: One researcher's struggles with positioning* examines dilemmas of positioning faced as a consequence of the alternative nature of the object of his research, as well as his insider-outsider status as researcher. Bak suggests that research involving alternatives calls for reflexivity with regard to researcher positioning and blurred boundaries. It also calls for careful and ongoing attentiveness to the ways in which insider and outsider positions are multiple, and in continuing flux, and open up opportunities for new ways of understanding.

The second section, '*Researched*' includes six chapters which build on the previous section to explore the complexities of investigating minorities, majorities, boundaries and borders. These chapters consider complex notions of privilege, voice, agency, authority and authenticity.

In Chapter 8: *Too cool for homeschool? Accessing underground unschoolers with Web 2.0* researcher Rebecca English continues the insider/outsider research conversations of chapters six and seven and brings together her research on families who choose unschooling and the challenges researchers face when accessing groups who whilst 'largely invisible' have an important contribution to make in terms of debates around education. This chapter stands as an example of the types of strategies, Web 2.0 tools and techniques that can be used to access marginalised educational communities for mainstream educational research. The success and limitations of the initiatives - initiatives which disrupt traditional relationships and dialectics between 'researcher and researched' and trouble issues of power, distance and participation - are examined.

Chapter 9: *Reducing the marginalisation of children: Relational knowledge production and the power of collaboration* is co-authored by university lecturers Ali Black and Gillian Busch, and early childhood learning centre director Marion Hayes. Educators, like children, are often viewed as subjects of research and their participation rights as co- authors and co-researchers are not always emphasised or promoted. This chapter encourages reflection on ethical commitments and taken for granted viewpoints, and positions educators, children, community stakeholders and wider audiences as essential to research collaboration and to processes of knowledge production. Using a sonata-formatted narrative to document interactions and reflections that occurred during projects at Marion's centre, this chapter considers how opportunities for debate, dialogue and conversation among different stakeholders, including the 'researched', and different audiences, might ultimately serve to reduce marginalisation.

Researchers Martin Mills, Glenda McGregor, Debra Hayes, and Kitty te Riele are concerned with how schools may become more socially just and inclusive of all young people. Their chapter, Chapter 10: *'Schools are for us': The importance of distribution, recognition and representation to creating socially just schools* contributes to relatively recent research which attempts to support the creation of socially just schools. The researchers look outside of the mainstream schooling sector to learn from schools resisting trends such as prescribed curricula, enforced external testing and corporate management models of schools, and whose characteristics suggest the enacting of an educational framework based on valuing difference and student voice and other dimensions of social justice.

In Chapter 11: *Speaking back to the mainstream from the margins: Lessons from one boutique senior secondary school* researchers Stewart Riddle and David Cleaver build on this theme of reframing mainstream schooling in more socially just ways. Asserting that social justice and equity concerns should be foundational in the provision of high quality education opportunities that are accessible to all young people, the chapter considers some key findings from a study into students' and teachers' lived experiences in a music-industry focused alternative school that works in the margins by catering to young people who have disconnected from their schooling. Using a narrative portrait and 'sound bytes' to capture a montage of voices, the chapter highlights the importance of an ethic of care, trust and respect, and promotes the boundary work that is being done to reconnect young people to meaningful forms of education.

In Chapter 12: *Maths challenges for pre-service teachers* co-authors Karen Trimmer and Nick Flegg review the literature on maths anxiety, numeracy levels and equity issues to clarify maths challenges experienced by pre-service primary teachers. Using vignettes drawn from data collected in their on-going research project, this chapter highlights key issues

causing maths challenge and the difficulties of providing specific maths help to individuals belonging to more than one marginal grouping. It further highlights the challenge of identifying students in need when they may not wish to be found.

Chapter 13: *Impacts on awareness, access and utilisation of early intervention support services for Indigenous families living in rural and remote areas. The national disability insurance scheme* closes this section on the 'researched'. In this chapter, researchers Karen Trimmer and Roselyn Dixon, and not-for-profit service provider organisation CEO Kerry Stubbs consider the impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) on the provision of disability services for Indigenous families and children with disabilities through not-for-profit organisations. The chapter highlights how Indigenous families in rural and remote communities, who are regularly exposed to major life stressors, are the most likely to underutilise early intervention services for children with disabilities. The chapter argues that for any service or research program to be successful, Indigenous perspectives must be listened to and included. Culturally appropriate, community engaging research approaches across many fields must also be identified.

'Research Methodologies' is the third section. Traces of meanings, connections and synergies from previous chapters can be found here. However the four chapters grouped in this section are collected together because they draw on a variety of methodological approaches to explore and challenge what characterises research. These chapters examine epistemologies that appear to shape beliefs about the forms of research that are privileged and valued in educational research and theory. They also invite questions about voice, power, and speaking for others in research.

In Chapter 14: *On the fringe of research: The case of community policing* researcher Celeste Lawson considers the broad issue of marginalised research in education/social sciences. Using a case study of community policing – quite different from mainstream policing, the chapter provides lessons for the social science researcher investigating issues and problems where dominant research discourses operate. The chapter offers suggestions for researchers interested in engaging in research with organisations. It considers the potential risks of speaking for others while also revealing how research can provide voice, power and agency to those operating at the margins.

A deliberately creative approach is adopted by researcher Jenny Donovan in Chapter 15: *Margins for error: A discussion of barriers preventing the connection of mainstream and margins when conducting in-school research.* Distinguishing her chapter from a formal academic research report, Donovan seeks to provoke discussion of barriers to conducting in-school research outside metropolitan areas. As with the previous chapter, readers and researchers are asked to consider the risks in speaking for others - particularly in cases where limited samples of the mainstream are often generalised to the entire population without consideration of their applicability to other parts of the mainstream, let alone to people in the margins. This chapter aims to challenge the existing paradigm of educational research in terms of sampling, and offers some innovative yet marginal solutions that could be gainfully brought into the mainstream.

The authors of Chapter 16 examine the complexities of a research journey that that crossed the boundaries between traditional Samoan culture (faasamoa) and the particular style of Western schooling that has been introduced into that country. In this chapter: *A journey in-between: Using Talanoa in research reporting* doctoral student Susan Faoagali (with doctoral

supervisor Eileen Honan) explores her attempts to traverse the epistemological and methodological spaces in-between the Samoan cultural and social context, the Australian higher education context in which she completed doctoral studies, and the marginal and mainstream spaces within the education system in Samoa. Talanoa, the Samoan concept for narrative and storytelling was used an authentic writing method in the completed doctoral thesis, and the chapter explains this use and its advantages in writing about this type of cross-cultural research.

Sarah Loch's Chapter 17: *A story of poetry and its provocative place in re-presentation* fittingly closes this final section to demonstrate how provocative spaces can open when creativity in research is enabled. This chapter considers Loch's entanglement and embodiment in the data re-presentation process, particularly through a window into poetic writing. In this chapter, Loch presents poetry she has written from interview and visual data. Writing poetically is part of her methodology and the poems included in this chapter constitute an experiment with different ways data can be written and interpreted. These poems both challenge and call us to respond to the often privileged positioning of authorial voice. We are encouraged to consider clarities and uncertainties of how writing poetically could disrupt the privileging of a researcher's voice through taking on new relationships with the task of research. We are encouraged to think beyond the ownership and location of voice to the privilege of *being with* and *coming from* voice.

The book concludes with a chapter that offers space for readers to respond and engage with ideas, questions, provocations and dilemmas surfacing across the book. Authors from each chapter have posed a handful of questions for readers and researchers to ponder over. These questions are intended to provide possible further extensions of thought about the chapters, and signal potential directions for exploring some of the underlying concepts and methods examined. It is hoped that this final chapter will motivate readers and researchers to reflect on what resonates, motivates, disrupts or repels, and in so doing provides opportunities for considering the messages they will take into their own work as well as encouraging thinking about ways to adapt, apply or challenge research in different contexts and other in-between spaces.

Where to now with researching the in-betweens?

While we cover much ground in this collection, there is further work to be done in pushing back the barriers and boundaries to education research that seeks to unravel the binary of mainstreams and margins. Some of the most evocative research takes place when we blur the distinction and instead choose to work the in-between, playing in the ruins of overcoded research categories. It is in the opportunities for working at the limits, at the boundaries of thought (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000) where some of the greatest opportunity exists for education researchers.

It is important to be mindful that an "awareness of the complexity, contingency, and fragility of the practices we invent to discover the truth about ourselves can be paralysing" (Lather, 1992, p. 96) and to continually return to social justice and the ethic of care that underpin our work as educational researchers. We believe that each of the chapters that follow in this book do their part to honour the ethic of care that we place at the core of our research endeavours.

Neither is it enough to simply destabilise the categories of bounded knowledge, such as those produced by overcoded categories of quantitative and qualitative research methods. We need

to continue working the in-betweens in order to "produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 175). These different knowledges and different methods of producing knowledge are perhaps the key to positioning education research as neither mainstream nor marginal, but as part of the in-between — what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) might refer to as the *And, And, And* of research. There are no beginnings or ends — no mainstreams or margins, just the spaces in-between — a limitless array of middles.

There is little doubt in our minds that we need to continue working in new spaces that are challenging, confronting and sometimes conflicting. We need to encourage researchers to move beyond traditions of quantitative and qualitative methodologies that become caught up in a methodolatory trap of self-reverence and self-reference. Instead, we should continue to look for new ways of working, new ways of knowing, that enable researchers and researched peoples to live and work together in meaningful, productive and joyful ways as we construct truths and knowledge together.

We hope that this book contributes in some part to the project of constructing new concepts for education research called for by St. Pierre (2004) and others, in order to de-marginalise subjugated knowledges and instead muddle in the middle of the in-between. We are attempting to produce socially relevant knowledge that can be taken up by other researchers in productive and differing ways.

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