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Accessing the field: methodological difficulties of research in schools

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Accessing the field: methodological difficulties of research in schools

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Abstract

This paper aims firstly to situate educational research in the current policy context and discuss the accounts of two early career researchers where accessing the research field has been problematic. Secondly it aims to explore the 'relational ties' of early career researchers as they attempt to gain access to the research field and co-operation of research participants, using their experiences and literature to explain difficulties encountered in their fieldwork.

Gaining access to the research field is an essential step for researchers but can be overlooked in literature and underestimated by researchers. Concern with fieldwork is typically more focused on the subsequent stages of data generation and analysis rather than with the preliminary but fundamental stage of entry which is sometimes underplayed in the research process. Some literature supports this contention (Schatzman and Straus, 1973; Johnson, 1975; Shaffir, Stebbins and Turowetz, 1980). Friedman and Orru (1991) discuss how fieldworkers have long acknowledged the problems of access but often failed to analyse them in a systematic manner. Although access and cooperation are sometimes conflated in literature (Wanat, 2008) they must be clearly understood as two distinct processes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Glesne, 1999; Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Rossman and Rallis, 2003). Indeed, gatekeeper approval for access does not de facto guarantee cooperation (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991) which can lead to tension in researcher-participant relationships.

Main findings suggest that although helpful in advancing understanding of the access issue, there is still work to be done to minimise mistrust of external researchers and for them to build social and cultural capital to better negotiate spaces in the research field.

Keywords: *research; access; participation; social capital*

Introduction

Since the publication of the Teaching Scotland's Future Report (Donaldson, 2011) partnership working across schools, local authorities and universities has increasingly become an expectation of the teaching profession in Scotland, with suggestions that the roles and responsibilities for the initial education of teachers become shared across these professional groups. Within this context the expectation that teachers will become more engaged in educational research, and research becomes more a feature of teachers' work, is implicit. As well as reforming the role of the teacher educator by this suggested hybridisation (Kennedy and Docherty, 2012) which blurs the existing boundaries between those responsible for this task, the report makes explicit reference to new professional requirements of teaching to become a "research-informed practice" (Donaldson, 2011, p.31). Alongside this, and in response to the Donaldson report, there has been a proliferation of Masters' and Doctoral professional programmes developed by Schools of Education offering accreditation for educators which has naturally caused an increase in schools-based educational research activity (Mercer, 2007). In a parallel but not unrelated development, the General Teaching Council of Scotland expanded its involvement in teachers' continuous professional development with the revised set of standards for professional practice and formal re-accreditation, namely Professional Update. A key feature of the new standards and professional update framework is research; specifically, teacher engagement with, and participation in educational research. A new research strategy has been devised and according to their website, the Council's research strategy aims to:

- encourage teachers to use and take part in research as part of their professional learning
- build a strong evidence base to inform policy
- share research findings with teachers and with the wider community in Scotland (GTCS website)

A substantial investment has been made to support this including the appointment of senior officers for research; the development of an education research portal and purchasing of subscription academic journals and electronic resources.

In England similar developments have taken place. A systemic reform of governance of schools has led to the emergence of "academies" self-governing schools or networks of schools, some of which can apply to become teaching schools. Teaching schools have six core responsibilities, one of which is research and development. They are expected to both engage with existing research, generate their own research and collaborate in the discussion and dissemination of their endeavours (UK Government, n.d.).

If taken as superficial indicators that a research culture in UK schools is not only alive and well but being actively nurtured and encouraged, these developments could be seen as overwhelmingly supportive of positive attitudes and dispositions towards research activity in

schools. However, engagement with research can be understood as more than making use of available literature or conducting personal research projects; research which seeks to engage in partnership arrangements across sectors as suggested in Donaldson (2011) or to explore pedagogical and epistemological phenomena in schools necessitates access to the field for those who are players but not necessarily working in sites of research. This article offers an account of two such experiences.

Rationale

By examining two separate case studies of research projects in Scottish schools which detail some of the difficulties encountered by early-stage PhD researchers in this domain, this article seeks to explore tasks relating to the undertaking of fieldwork for a qualitative research study; recruitment and gaining access. In the context of the paper therefore, gaining access is understood as involving both securing entry into a particular organisation and ensuring that individuals associated with it, such as employees or users, will serve as informants (or as in the two examples provided in this article; schools and affiliated agencies, teachers, youth workers and young people).

Methods to engage with the research setting are discussed by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995); Bryman (2001); Patton (2002); Shenton and Hayter (2004) who identify the two fundamental tasks into conducting fieldwork. The first is to gain entry into the organisation where the fieldwork will be carried out and secondly, to persuade the potential research participants within the organisation to take part and share information through interviews, observations and focus groups.

More recently, Johl and Renganathan (2010) offer a new conceptualisation of access by combining Buchanan's *et. al.* (1994) four stage access model: get in, get on, get out, get back, with Laurilla's (1997) three stages of access, namely: formal contact, personal contact and rapport-building. The combination provides a useful operational rubric for novice researchers. However, even when these steps are taken, engagement with this procedure is no guarantee of success. Wolff (2004) poses questions which contextualise our experiences: Firstly, how can researchers succeed in making contact and securing cooperation from informants? Secondly how can researchers position themselves in the field so as to secure the necessary time, space and social relations to be able to carry out the research? These are the questions we shall explore using our experiences as early researchers in the process of gaining access to our research field and research participants.

Two research stories

The first story is an account of fieldwork experience of a PhD researcher whose PhD study focuses on young people who have been identified by their schools and outside agencies as being at risk of leaving employment or training. This group is also referred to as More Choices, More Chances (Scottish Government, 2006). Black and minority ethnic (BME) young people have been highlighted in recent studies (Hayward et al, 2008; Smeaton et al,

2010; Baird and Collins, 2010; Netto et al, 2011) as having a higher propensity of falling out of education, employment and training; this group was therefore chosen as research participants. Through youth policies such as Opportunities for All (2012), its More Choices, More Chances (2006) strategy, local councils, schools and affiliated agencies work together in the last six months of compulsory education as the young people prepare with the support of delegated teachers, youth workers and affiliated organisations, to transition out of school. The study examines the construction of the label More Choices, More Chances/pre-NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) group; their identity, sense of belonging and the implications their experiences might have for policy and practice based on the findings from the research participants. The researcher was trying to negotiate entry into schools with high ethnic minority student populations and was denied access to the schools for a variety of reasons.

The second account involves fieldwork experiences in a PhD study of the Learning Round (LR), an observational, collaborative professional learning activity involving groups of teachers in classroom peer observation. LR is now being developed in education circles in Scotland across primary, secondary and tertiary sectors (See Education Scotland, 2011 and Conroy, Hulme and Menter 2013) . LR is a practice that has enjoyed a considerable amount of endorsement from policy-making bodies (see Philpott and Oates, 2015a; 2015b). Bearing in mind this official support and the current enthusiasm for schools-based research, it might be reasonably assumed that recruitment for research around this practice would be a relatively unproblematic process, even with taking into account the above caveats. Experience thus far suggests otherwise. Although networks and connections can afford access to find out who may be interested in LR (several schools noted interest), whether or not they were in fact doing LR and might be willing to engage in research about it proved to be a much more difficult question to answer.

As this paper will demonstrate, methodological difficulties for researchers in gaining access and securing participation to schools as sites of research have the potential to sabotage projects, and early stage researchers need to be reflexively aware of this. This has implications not only for students, but also for supervisors, research directors and funding bodies. Access to these sites is crucial but problems encountered at the stage of securing arrangements for this is an area which does not enjoy the same attention in social science methodology literature as the stages of data gathering and analysis; the preliminary but fundamental stage of access tends to get overlooked.

Friedman and Orru (1991) discuss how fieldworkers have long acknowledged the problems of gaining access to research settings but often failed to analyse them in a systematic manner. Feldman, Bell and Berger (2003) go onto say that the importance of gaining access has been acknowledged by research academics but little has been written on the issues of gaining

entry and subsequently staying long enough in the research field. So although a small body of literature (Schatzman and Straus, 1973; Johnson, 1975; Shaffir, Stebbins and Turowetz, 1980; Wanat, 2008; Widding, 2012) has acknowledged researcher concerns with the issue of access, our view is that the scant attention given to this problem in methodological literature is disproportionate to experience of the difficulties posed by it.

Analytical framework

Rossmann and Rallis (1998, p.66) question the traditional social science methodology, further challenging objectivist assumptions and traditional norms for conducting research, expanding the social world to include other world perspectives. Underpinning this challenge are four interrelated notions which are crucial to gather data for the research study:

1. Research fundamentally involves issues of power
2. The research report is not transparent but rather it is authored by a raced, gendered, classed and politically oriented individual
3. Race, class, and gender are crucial for understanding experience and
4. Historic, traditional research has silenced members of oppressed or marginalised groups.

For analysis of these difficulties Bourdieu offers useful theoretical concepts in framing and understanding encounters in the research field. Although often used to illuminate sociological concerns of inequalities in race, class and gender, (Grenfell and James, 2004) there are many useful illustrations of Bourdieusian concepts put to work in educational research contexts. Bourdieu argues for a reflexive approach not only in terms of the researcher's gender, social class, race, but also in how they position themselves in the field of academia. Fitzpatrick and May (2015) go one step further and state that it is this academic habitus that enables the researcher to 'see certain things and not others' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Fitzpatrick and May, 2015, p.104). Fine (1991) examines her own positionality as one of privilege, as a white, middle class academic, exploring the experiences of African American young people who are labelled as 'drop outs' as part of the reflexivity discourse.

The Bourdieusian concept of habitus is frequently applied in educational research and is generally understood as the internalised dispositions, absorbed by individuals as they participate in their social environments and reproduced in their practices. Nash (1999, p.177) defines habitus as:

a generative schema in which the forms of elemental social structures come, through the process of socialisation, to be embodied in individuals, with the result that people necessarily act in such a way that the underlying structures are reproduced and given effect.

This definition supports a defence of Reay's (2004) methodological, multi-layered understanding of habitus as method. In accounting for previous influences on present and future behaviours, habitus can be used as a tool which 'operationalizes' empirical research i.e., it is put into practice in the research process rather than being overlaid as a post-hoc explanation of data (Reay, 2004, p.440). Rawolle and Lingard (2013, p.123) define habitus as

the 'attentiveness to the flow, logic, and contest of practical activities'. Costa (2013, p.6) returns to the idea of habitus as situated experiences of individuals within social contexts, which is the most relevant to our account:

Habitus is partly connected to individuals' experiences and the rituals, norms and approaches to which they are exposed or in which individuals are involved. Habitus is equally related to the social and professional environments in which they participate and that inevitably influence and are reflected in their practice'.

Different forms of symbolic capital apply in the field and researcher deployment of them can greatly influence interactions and events. Social capital accrued through networks of lasting social relations (Grenfell and James, 1998, p. 20) and personal connections can determine what sites or fields might be accessible to the researcher. The field itself is often explained as a relational space of competition with overlapping boundaries and power struggles being played out inside it by agents and their dispositions, as they gain and lose social, economic or cultural capital (Grenfell, 1998; Rawolle and Lingard, 2013). Fitzpatrick and May (2015) discuss the school field, where the educational researcher may experience flows of power through relationships within the school but also simultaneously in the academic hierarchy, in subject disciplines, and in interactions across all these communities.

Capital attracts capital and so inequalities in the field can polarise agents and events within it. Holligan (2015) offers an understanding of research capacity as symbolic capital; flowing as energy within the field of educational research and brokered in exchanges between agents: he describes the benefits gained from value added to agents' social capital in network interactions across fields involving elite universities.

Illusio is a less frequently used Bourdieusian concept in educational research (Colley, 2014). In her critique of impact in educational research, Colley (2014) introduces the concept of illusio as the players' belief that the game is worth playing, to the extent that playing it is not questioned. It could be understood as the stakes, or investment that agents have/make, or reveal/conceal in interactions in the game on the field (Colley, 2013). For early stage researchers this is significant, as their research activity carries higher stakes for them than for others who may have already validated their work in publications and established their position in the academic field. But many games involving multiple players can be played out simultaneously within overlapping fields, and conflicting illusio can limit outcomes for some players, while advancing others.

Rowlands and Rawolle (2013) use the concept of illusio to analyse the dominance of the term 'neoliberalism' in educational research. The authors argue that we are acting on illusio when we engage (frequently, as they demonstrate) in debates on neoliberalism and its impact on education and research. In frequently referencing this term we acknowledge the high stakes it holds in the game. However, in failing to critically examine it, by failing to define it or

challenge its dominance, the authors argue that we run the risk of 'further entrenching the neoliberal *doxa*' (Rowlands and Rawolle, 2013, p.270) and miss opportunities to disrupt it and change the game.

Our accounts here use some pilot data and these concepts to illustrate how social capital needs to be generated between teachers and researchers as players in the field of educational research if worthwhile research is to be produced within it. We recognise that both the studies are small scale projects and the findings cannot be generalised as a whole. We use Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, social and cultural capital and *illusio* as tools to explore the gatekeeper and staff perspectives to better understand how we as early career researchers can position ourselves more effectively in future studies, in order not to be excluded from this discourse. Firstly, however we will explain the background to story one.

Researcher one's story: background and context

Modood (2004) suggests ethnic groups such as Chinese and Indian, go onto perform better at schools where the same level of disadvantages persist such as poverty, social class, yet the young people are able to choose a route into higher education. However, there is evidence that this is not always the case, for example Bangladeshi, African Caribbean, and Pakistani heritage are performing comparatively less well in schools, where their socio-economic background is suggested as one of a set of complex indicators to lower educational attainment (Shah et al, 2010; Netto et al, 2011; Deuchar and Graham, 2012). This is reiterated by Smeaton et al (2010) who state that the issues leading to young people being labelled as having the potential to go onto negative destinations emerge when they are children, early in their school journey and share the Innovation Unit's definition:

Parts of our schools' system can match the best anywhere in the world but overall our school system is not world class. It systematically fails certain groups of children: children from poor backgrounds, looked after children, children excluded from school, children from certain ethnic groups. (Smeaton et al, 2010, p.5)

The children from ethnic groups are then identified as Afro Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi by Smeaton et al (2010). Osler and Starkey (2005) claim that these groups are not given the same opportunities as the main student population.

Focusing on Scottish Government youth policies such as the Opportunities for All (Scottish Government, 2012) More Choices, More Chances (MCMC) (Scottish Government, 2006) strategy, I designed a small case study with a focus on the black and minority ethnic and new arrival young people, school staff and youth workers in secondary schools in Glasgow. The young people at the centre of this research project have been identified by their schools and outside agencies as having the propensity to fall into a disadvantaged category on the risk matrix (a data management system utilised by various agencies such as social work, health, etc.) and requiring intervention (MCMC). The intervention to supply additional support comes into practice in the last six months of compulsory education. I interpret this process through a

Bourdieuian lens, where I perceive the risk matrix as a cultural product in the education system to inscribe in both teachers' and young people's minds, a social order, where the young people are categorised as to their place in the school system by institutions and society (Bourdieu, 1986). They draw upon their values and beliefs that they then internalise, interpret, and in situations of conflict aspects of their identity are both challenged and contested. The formation of identities is shaped by the interplay between the cultural demands of individuals or communities and the social-economic conditions they inhabit (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1996; Creese et al, 2006). The social order is thus inscribed in their minds of their position in society (Bourdieu, 1986, p.471). The research is designed to explore their cultural identity and their sense of belonging in their schools and communities. This work involved: collaborating with youth work organisations on interventions in school over a 6-month period; semi- structured interviews with the teaching staff in charge of the MCMC cohort of young people along with youth workers who delivered the intervention; paired interviews with the identified MCMC young people, culminating into a combined focus group for each school, with the teachers, youth workers and students.

The fast changing demographic landscapes of schools, where numerous communities lead interconnected lives, are prime sites for discovering the ways in which pupils from different ethnic and social backgrounds co-exist and negotiate new spaces where their identities are formed, questioned and challenged (Bhopal and Myers, 2008). Schools with high ethnic minority populations were ideal research sites for this project.

I sought to find the answers to the following questions using the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice, where the concepts of habitus, field and capital were used to structure and frame the research questions and the themes, to analyse both the structures and agency involved in each part of the question.

The study was guided by research questions as follows:

1. What does it mean to be a BME MCMC Young Person?
 - a) How do BME MCMC Young People perceive themselves and others around them in the school, youth work organisation and in their community?
 - b) How do BME MCMC Young People negotiate their cultural settings?

2. How are the young people perceived by their schools and youth work agencies?
 - a) What are the needs that arise out of this 'particular' set of circumstances?
 - b) What are the responses to MCMC policy by schools?

I had been granted ethical approval from both university and the local authority, however, I had difficulty gaining access to the research sites. I contacted the schools through email, indicating my interest in conducting research, including the draft proposal of the study, emailing on three separate occasions over an eighteen-month period. This yielded only three

responses from the eighteen schools contacted declining to take part in the study due to exam preparation, staff/resource shortage or the head teacher being on sick leave. Wanat (2008) discusses how gatekeepers and informants in order to avoid cooperation, shift responsibility to others in the organisation, control communication, request additional information, and forget to follow through on promises of assistance. I phoned the remaining schools to make an appointment to speak to the head teacher (HT). School secretaries in response as gatekeepers would typically give assurances of a return call, take details or claim they had no access to HT diaries. No HT returned the call.

After a discussion with my supervisors, I was advised to visit in person to request an appointment with printouts of my synopsis; the ethical approval letter from the local council and my business card. I was invited to leave material at the reception desk and informed I would be contacted shortly by the HT to discuss the research. Again there was no response. This difficulty disrupted the fieldwork element of the project, as the schools which were contacted have been targeted for the study on the basis of their unique characteristics. Without access or participants, the project does not exist. As Burgess notes, "access is a prerequisite; a precondition for the research to be conducted" (Burgess, 1984, p.36).

This barrier caused me to rethink my position in the research field; I had little cultural capital in the eyes of the gatekeepers; my power of influence was weak and access was not forthcoming. The project was in danger of collapse, yet any potential data subjects were unaware of this, whether they accepted to participate or not. I was advised to go to the top of the system, which in this case was the local authority, which is in line with Cannell and Khan (1953) thoughts in obtaining consent and cooperation, as they feel there is a better chance for a positive outcome if the leaders of the organisation are consulted from the beginning. Patton (2002) also believes this strategy is the most successful method of securing entry into the field. I contacted the Education Services who said they could not help me gain access as it was up to the individual schools to grant access and they could not get involved.

Dismayed at the lack of access to research sites for Early Career Researchers led me to emailing the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong learning where I detailed the barriers I had faced over the 14-month period trying to gain access to schools. I was invited to email my research proposal for consideration. I was assured that contact would be made with the relevant department in the council to discuss if there was a need for the research to be undertaken. If it was a viable piece of work, they would allow the research to go ahead. In this instance, I as the researcher did go right to the top of the 'organisation' as Patton (2002) suggests and set off a chain of negotiations between various agencies to enable access.

The schools' perspective

The Education Services of the local authority then endorsed the research to be carried out. A gatekeeper was assigned to me, who personally contacted the schools and agencies on my behalf, introducing the research and its potential to help build evidence towards educational policy reform, resulting in access to three schools. In what follows, one email exchange into which I was copied shows the negotiations between the head teacher of one school and the local council gatekeeper.

I am, of course, aware of the research proposal but the fact that no school has made an official response is indicative of the very real pressures which we are all under at the moment, pressures which require us to take difficult decisions about what constitutes our main priorities. I have no reason to doubt that the eventual findings might be of some use to our schools but I do not feel that I am able to commit to this proposal at the moment, with all of its attendant possible disruption to teaching and learning. I would also stress that I am not in any way speaking on behalf of my colleagues in this matter.

HT, Brookes High School (pseudonym)

The Head teacher at Brookes High School cites the pressures the school faces in prioritising its teaching commitments to its students, and the unwillingness to make space for the research and researcher, due to possible disruption to teaching and learning. He also evaluates his investment in the research process in terms of benefits to schools. His response indicates that he does not see this as a viable investment, indicating low *illusio* values: his belief in the worth of this particular game is lacking. However, the local authority gatekeeper replies:

At least one school has now connected with the research. I totally understand your point about the very real pressures we are under at the moment (we are not immune to it in HQ!). Can I emphasise that all that the researcher is looking to do at this stage is to discuss with each school what activities are feasible/possible in relation to her proposed research. She has an idea of what she would ideally like to do, but understands that she will need to be flexible in relation to what is actually possible.
Local authority gatekeeper reply to HT

There is a positioning of power and negotiation occurring in the email exchange. Space is being created for research to potentially take place, however in knowing neither me nor my previous work, a sense of being “ordered to cooperate” (Glesne 1999:39) by superiors is perceived. *Illusio* is high for one set of players and low for another. It could be surmised that this might reflect the return on the stake they are investing in: associations with research in the post Donaldson (2011) era may accrue a good return for a local authority. However, targeting a typically underperforming population within a school may not. Access was eventually granted on condition that the schools select the research participants.

I ensured that participants were fully aware of the role of ethical consent before taking part, as set by BERA (2011), the university and the local authority. I identified the aims of the

research, its practical applications (if any), the design, methods and procedures, and the nature and size of the groups. The delay in access allowed me to make the necessary adaptations and adjust to new timescales and show consideration and respect by being more flexible and adaptive in my approach in conversation with the head teachers and senior management members within the school. This reflexive process is in line with the argument which Flick (1998, p. 57) makes i.e. research will disturb the system and cause disruption of routines, without offering anything of real benefit to the institute. This would offer one explanation as to why the schools had refused access, previously citing reasons including exam preparation time and relevance to them. However, all three schools who were approached by the gatekeeper, have now taken part in the research.

Even though I had been given access to the three schools, this was not achieved without power being exerted upon the schools by agents in a position to wield it. Again schools pushed back at this by insisting on controlling the sampling process, and by controlling access to the students through monitoring of my encounters with them in one of the schools.

The Research Participants

The three schools had difficulty matching the sampling criteria exactly as some of the young people who had been identified for the research did not come to the school on the day the interviews were scheduled, even though they had agreed to take part. The young people weren't told the full scope of the study, as the gatekeeper, HT, teachers and youth workers didn't wish to highlight that they had been chosen for interviews as a result of an alert on the risk matrix, therefore requiring additional support to ensure they did not fall into a negative destination upon leaving school. Instead they were told that the HT or teacher felt that they might have an interesting story to share with the interviewer. I was also strongly requested not to speak in those terms, but in terms of exploring the ethnicity and culture of the young people. This has made me question if the young people are indeed 'red' on the matrix, or disengaged, as the gatekeepers have made it a condition of my conducting the research not to discuss this, or state that is the reason they are chosen. I had to take the word of the adults in charge, that they had met the criteria I had asked for, and trust them. Participant consent was therefore given, but I felt that there was a possibility the young person felt they might be penalised for voicing an opinion at this late stage and deciding to just go with the flow. I keenly felt the lack of agency and helplessness in a few of the participants. Also as the researcher I felt as if I had no agency in the decision making process, as I was dictated to, as to how I could conduct my research, rather than as I initially requested. Although I agreed, these ethical doubts remained beneath the surface.

A result was achieved in gaining access, but at what cost to me as the researcher, to the institute I represented, the local authority, the schools and the young people who took part in the study? Reflectively, my awareness has increased of how and where I was placed both in the field of practice, and within wider fields, which took into account schools, local authorities

and policy makers. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) demonstrated the significance of understanding not only the immediate habitus, but extending this to encompass the wider politics of the field and other related doxa (Fitzpatrick and May, 2015). Using this reflexive sociology as suggested by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 257) enabled me to put aside what I should know, and examine how I knew it, and my positioning, within this 'space of interaction'. This recognition of my own biases, beliefs and assumptions became a tool in itself to understand power and powerlessness, which can 'enhance social emancipation' (Navarro, 2006, p.15-16).

Researcher two's story: background and context

As an educational professional of many years' experience in different fields I have over time developed relationships with fellow professionals who are interested in education through work with national organisations and social media, so may be considered as an agent operating with a healthy level of social capital, affording helpful social connections within the field of education. For the empirical part of my study, knowledge of events and negotiations in the field were essential preparation long before any formal arrangement for research is put into place. I firstly needed to identify schools where there is interest in the practice of Learning Rounds and where staff may be considering doing this as part of their professional learning or collegiate time plans, but it also needs to fall within a timescale that is compatible with my research plan. Although this may appear to be straightforward it requires constant scanning of the field for knowledge of practitioners and what their interests are - finding out where are the pockets of interest in learning rounds; who is or has been carrying out this practice; whether they might be planning it within a compatible timescale for my research and crucially -will they be likely to wish to engage in a research project about it? Without a degree of social capital built up through networks in the field, this would be very difficult to ascertain.

I had prior knowledge of the process of Learning Rounds through my role in the National CPD Team (see Education Scotland, 2010), which developed and supported engagement with LR during the period 2008-2011. This combined with professional connections via the various networks described above should have made the recruitment process for this study straightforward. Several avenues were available to explore, so meetings were set up to discuss how things might proceed. One school responded to a call for interest quickly (School A). Further to this a personal contact reported to me two other schools who had previously sought some guidance on the practice: contact was made and agreement was reached about participating in my research. Later in the process another school leader made an unsolicited approach via email asking for some guidance on the LR process. This was followed up with emails, telephone conversations and meetings with the staff concerned and the possibility of a mutually beneficial arrangement involving my support in setting up and helping them with the implementation of LR in their school with their quid pro quo consent for me to use this as a research opportunity was discussed.

This would necessitate some changes to the design of the researcher's study: a case-study design had been anticipated, not a participatory action research project but having investigated some of the literature on this (McTaggart, 1994; Leitch and Day, 2000; Kemmis, 2009) and in discussion with the supervisor, I decided that conceptualising the project using a participatory action research design would be possible and should be pursued. I was in the fortunate position of having four potential sites for research, which offered from one point of view some contingency, or from another, ample data, as my original intention was to consider in depth studies at two schools. What will be shared now is the detail of the experiences in only one of these schools for the purposes of this analysis. It represents a cautionary tale for early-stage researchers to beware of the pitfalls of negotiating conflicting interests at play in fields of educational research.

Research story two, process: School A

This research project started in the school which had initially expressed interest (school A). Given the endorsement it has received from policy making bodies, within the wider field of education LR might be seen as a 'legitimate pedagogic product' (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.169); a resource which can be used to change social or cultural capitals at play. At an initial meeting senior management expressed enthusiasm for both LR and the research project, stating that the parent council was pleased to be involved with university research, thus positioning the project as an investment in both social and cultural capital terms. Some further investment had already been done in the school by a senior leader (who was the key contact) to solicit and establish a core group who could take part in the LR. The senior leader was a LR enthusiast, having been involved in the process in other schools. Within this field then, the agents holding gatekeeper powers were supportive, but they were not the ones directly involved in the work. The core group who would carry out this work emerged from the Learning and Teaching working group within the school. This was one of several sub-fields within the school. As part of the 'habitus' of this field, this structure reflects

the organisational ethos of those senior managers who are attempting to apply nationally defined policies, or the professional activities, thoughts and beliefs of those being organised
(Grenfell and James, 1998, p. 169).

This was reinforced by a doxa which was established in the school obliging all staff to sign up to one or other of a selection of working groups as collegial development. Rowlands and Rawolle (2013, p.261) cite Bourdieu's definition of doxa as: 'the point of view of those who dominate by dominating the state and who have constituted their point of view as universal by constituting the state.' In a school context, this describes leadership decisions or enforced dogmas, depending on interpretation. There had been a management decision to initiate LR in the school and a briefing was carried out to explain the process and elicit interest. A group

of agents, operating in the sub-field of the Teaching and Learning group within this hierarchical relational space, was identified to engage in this work.

Data suggest that there was a feeling in the group that although all members of staff subscribed to the doxa, they had been targeted with extra workload and not empowered to resist or refuse the invitation. Their motivation to engage reveals a sense of obligation and resentment: 'we had much more work to do than the other groups' (participant C). In this sense the agents in the sub- field of the working groups may be perceived as colluding in the game by signing ethical consent forms (which two out of three actually did). Signatures can count for a lot, whilst simultaneously counting for little. They gave me a green light for the project, but made me question their worth, as I knew there was an underlying sense of obligation in the project and their collegiate working group. Participants were constrained by their relational positioning and they exercised their resistance in the field by directing it towards the research project. Participation in the project was not universally embraced by all members of this group; two engaged with the interview process, most committed to a minimum number of research-related activities and one did not respond to invitations for interview.

The reasons can also be explained by the significant material and environmental disruption the school was experiencing at the time: it was nearing the end of a reconstruction process that had been happening on site over time so logistics were difficult. A new system of assessment was being introduced by a dominant national agency (agent) which was clearly a concern for staff and a priority for development work. There were very real and very pressing competing *illusio* at play in this field. If *illusio* are stakes in the field-as-game, then it is little wonder that the more dominant national interests are the ones to which agents orientate themselves. Colley (2014, p.11) claims that 'habitus socialises people to feel their *illusio* simply as acting sensibly'. It is sensible to play the game that involves national regularities of practice as set out by dominant players before attending to other interests. Thus in spite of gatekeeper support for research access to this field, the *illusio* of the project was overwhelmed by more a combination of environmental challenges and dominant games at play in the field: ultimately, the cultural capital of the project was esteemed to be of a higher value by the school leaders than it was for those taking part; neither this nor the social capital stake at play here returned on either investment.

Early stage researcher capital-building

Our positioning and social capital in our respective occupational fields and areas of professional interest may afford us access to networks and some relational resources; however, this is not replicated in our positioning in the academic field. Stepping between two identities as practitioners and as early stage researchers, our positioning in the field of educational research is problematic: in schools-based educational research, we are not dominant agents; we have some symbolic social capital in connections but little cultural

capital in reputation; we are at the beginning of our capital accumulation in this field and as such have limited influence. This has been a considerable impediment to the research projects we describe here. Perhaps more importantly it illustrates the need for a greater exploration of the respective values attributed to research as cultural capital where fields of policy, practice and the academy converge; of bridging the social relationships within these intersecting fields; of the important role supervisors may have in introducing early-stage researchers to the field and in developing relationships and social capital which support shared endeavours for further development of practice-informed research and research-informed practice in education.

Conclusion

This article has explored some of the difficulties encountered by early career researchers in gaining access to the research field. These experiences led to us reflexively question both our status and worth as early career researchers and they highlight how a lack of social and cultural capital can be barriers to negotiating entry and participating in the field of educational research. Problems associated with approaching and negotiating access to the field at different levels become apparent as we step between our identities as practitioners and early-stage researchers. We have made the assumption that it may be our lack of social capital in the research field which has made both recruitment and access problematic and we have raised questions about the value of our research as a commodity of cultural capital; how this is recognised and valued in various fields.

We recognise that experienced researchers may also encounter these difficulties; opinions are frequently sought on many aspects of practice and research fatigue is a genuine concern. We also recognise that schools operate in challenging circumstances, sometimes predictable (e.g. periods of examination), and sometimes spontaneous (e.g. staff absence; technology failure; environmental problems with buildings). These are serious constraints which can inhibit agents' capacity to act upon and in the field, and we recognise the importance of acknowledging this. However, a lesser recognised phenomenon is the importance of bridging with, and between, both gatekeepers and participants in order to build social capital via positive relationships, as successful access is paramount to avoid some of the pitfalls we encountered.

Through sharing these experiences, we hope we have contributed to wider literature on access (Glesne 1999; Magolda 2000; Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Wanat 2008; Widding, 2012) and highlighted the need for greater reflexive awareness on the part of researchers of the largely unspoken messiness, blind alleys and roadblocks that can be encountered in the research process.

Additionally, we caution against assuming that access guarantees cooperation (Johnson 1975; Burgess 1991), and encourage supervisors and other academics such as directors of postgraduate studies to discuss this potential problem with their students; prepare them for it in structuring research plans, timelines and milestones flexibly enough to accommodate a lengthy recruitment process. We would also exhort funding bodies of the need to be aware that difficulties in recruitment will add to pressures in completing PhD research in a three-year time period.

Finally, we shine a spotlight on this common, but under-discussed problem. Research students need to know that their similar experiences are in fact common, and not a result of failure on their part or lack of interest in their research in particular.

Although we welcome and are encouraged by current policy interest and exhortations for synergy between schools-based and academy-based research activity, we are concerned that the field is not enabling the translation of policy into practice. We welcome further debate around developing relationships and social capital for all agents at work within the convergent fields of schools based research, the academy and policy-making.

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