In Dialogue

Ethics in Literacy Research beyond the Institutional Review Boards

In this issue’s In Dialogue, our featured contributors—Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth, Caitlin L. Ryan, Timothy San Pedro, and Jen Scott Curwood—reflect on what it means to do ethical literacy research. Each author explores ethics as defined not just by traditional, institutional standards, but by standards informed by their specific contexts and broader definitions of justice. Together, these pieces provide direction for any researcher concerned with producing work that nourishes communities beyond research institutions. We begin with an interrogation by Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth, professor of sociocultural studies at Western Michigan University, and Caitlin L. Ryan, associate professor of reading education at East Carolina University, of what “risk” entails when conducting research in pursuit of justice for LGBTQ youth and communities. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan posit that while queer topics themselves are problematically labeled “risky” in classrooms, the real risk lies in perpetuating the silencing of LGBTQ educational experiences through an overregulation of research that engages queer themes with children. Timothy San Pedro, assistant professor of multicultural and equity studies in education at The Ohio State University, continues the conversation with a call to reframe the roles of researcher and participant, highlighting the possibilities of seeing participants as partners in all aspects of research. Rather than attempting qualitative research in pursuit of universal truths about participants’ experiences, San Pedro argues that researchers ought to engage participants as coinvestigators, storying the rich, fluid findings that emerge in dialogue between all inquirers. We end with Jen Scott Curwood, associate professor in English education and media studies at the University of Sydney, who offers essential questions for researchers collecting data from online forums. Curwood poses ethical dilemmas common in digitally mediated spaces that push researchers to address both the seemingly unfamiliar conundrums experienced with new technologies and the humanity perennially present in digital worlds. Speaking from across literacy conversations and invigorating ongoing discussions with new inquiries, our In Dialogue contributors encourage us to follow in their footsteps to actively inquire how our research can be ethical.

Reframing and Reclaiming Risk in Queer Literacy Research

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In an interview we conducted as part of a longitudinal study, a queer-identified elementary teacher we have worked with for many years used the word “negligent” to describe what it would be for her to ignore issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, gender expression, and other “isms” (as she and her students said) in her teaching (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). Her use of the term negligent, and the ways it reframed issues of ethics and responsibility in elementary teaching, made us pause. Although we are queer scholars who do queer educational research in K–5 settings, the institutional structures around us in both the academy and K–5 schools emphasize a very different sense of ethical concerns when it comes to our work, one that centers on the “riskiness” and “[in]appropriateness” of discussing gender and sexuality in classrooms with young children, rather than the risk of not doing so. As queer scholars, we navigate the same heteronormative assumptions about children, innocence, and whose identities are “controversial” or “risky,” while we simultaneously try to research them, documenting their nuance to provide maps for others through such terrain. What that means, both in terms of ethical and methodological work, is that we are continually negotiating, reclaiming, and attempting to recalculate and rearticulate normative, oppressive, heterosexist notions of “risk.”

In IRB terms, “risk” traditionally refers to the vulnerability and possible harm that research participants will be asked to accept and agree to undertake. What, however, makes discussion of LGBTQ people inherently “risky” other than institutionalized heteronormativity? If the marker of risk is “how people in society might react if they knew,” then suggesting there is risk in investigating queer topics might acknowledge the material, real-life consequences of homophobia on one hand, but also makes risk stand in as a co-marker of stigma vis-à-vis normative perspectives, further marginalizing diverse people’s identities and experiences on the other. In this way, the idea of risk continues to be borne individually by marginalized people navigating dangerous social structures rather than by the structural realities that create the problems in the first place. How can we document that teaching about LGBTQ topics isn’t risky—in that it doesn’t cause undue harm to children—if institutional gatekeepers think it’s too risky to even let us try?

When we share our work with preservice and inservice teachers, we are often asked if we think it’s a good idea to send a letter home telling parents that the class will be reading a certain LGBTQ-inclusive book and possibly even ask for their permission to have their child be a part of that lesson. While it is always a good idea to be in communication with parents and families about what their children are learning, the assumption that reading and learning from this children’s book is different and riskier than other lessons with other children’s books only makes sense given an assumption that heterosexuality is normal and standard and therefore not risky. It is only deviations from that norm that could “cause trouble” and therefore might require special permission. No attention is given to the children and families who might finally be reflected in and affirmed by such lessons.

This notion of “causing trouble” and of deviating from the norm continually shapes the ways that we enter into queer literacy research in elementary schools. Certainly, we both have the privilege of being white, cisgender, and even “straight-
passing,” allowing us some choice in our level of outness with participants and school officials. Like San Pedro (this issue), we must be concerned with trust building in our research, but because of the history of silence and inherent lack of trust for queer people in school spaces (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Silin, 1995), with whom we build trust and in what ways is continually negotiated, often stealthily. In fact, our strongest and longest-lasting research partnerships have been built on relationships formed through personal connections outside of school buildings and our roles as researchers, creating foundational, reciprocal relationships prior to and outside of the realm of IRB approval.

Similarly, we choose how much we out our studies. When communicating with stakeholders about our research, we make active choices about how to frame our research. Oftentimes, that means writing about our research in terms of diversity and access for all students through inclusive literacy practices. This is what the research is about, but is it ethical to leave out that we have an explicit interest in LGBTQ-inclusive literacy practices? And if it is, is that exclusion less ethical than the exclusion of LGBTQ people in elementary curriculum, particularly when we know that naming LGBTQ identities might mean that we lose access? What if that access means producing the kinds of research that might better illustrate—and eventually even change—those conditions for LGBTQ people? Curwood (this issue) points out how sites she researches are always changing; we wonder how we should navigate and support others in navigating the variable and rapidly changing politics, policies, and laws (which, of course, vary from state to state) surrounding LGBTQ people and schools. What, ethically, do we say to teachers in states where saying “LGBTQ” in schools is against the law when we know that more LGBTQ-inclusive teaching can save lives?

Therefore, we find ourselves as queer literacy researchers wondering less about ethics as embraced by institutional structures that privilege normative positions, and instead challenging ourselves to keep these questions as the heart of what guides us: Who is our work accountable to? Who does it empower? (Rodríguez, 2018; see also San Pedro, this issue). What if we acknowledge that our work is more concerned with changing conditions for queer people than with protecting the comfort of straight people? Can we recognize and respect the risk that (straight) teachers take when they incorporate queer topics into curriculum, while still centering that expectation as what queer people and families deserve? What would it mean for literacy scholars to reject normative ideas of risk and instead see from the perspective of the teacher from the beginning of this piece?

Literacy researchers could do this by considering the deep ethical issues involved in deciding what and who is talked and taught about and, conversely, what and who is marginalized or left out of our classroom conversations and curriculum altogether. What about the impact of ignoring the experiences of students who have LGBTQ family members, or who don’t perform gender in cisnormative ways, or who might come out as LGBT later in life? What would literacy research and practice look like if we considered the ethics of not including the impact of educational practices on the ways that students understand gender and sexuality?
Curwood (this issue) suggests that researchers need to “share responsibility for the development of field-specific guidelines and university requirements related to the ethical conduct of research” (p. 399). We concur, and would add that this sharing should involve members of traditionally marginalized communities, including LGBTQ people, to ensure that research practices do not maintain, reify, or ignore organizational and societal homo- and transphobia, and hetero- and cisnormativity. We challenge ourselves and our literacy research colleagues to consider as ethical questions, as questions centered in reformulated conceptions of risk: Who is my work accountable to? Who does it empower?

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**Applying Projects in Humanization: Lessons of Critical Listening and Storying**

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What are the most salient ethical issues you face in your research alongside communities, schools, educators, and/or youth? What are the ways in which you’ve navigated these ethical complexities?

What are new methodological directions you believe the field can continue to develop to address these complexities?
In an effort to engage with the focus questions crafted by the coeditors of this special issue, I begin with a premise: The stories shared between researchers and youth are sacred gifts offered to one another because of mutual and dialogic respect, reciprocity, and answerability held within the creation, development, and sustenance of relationships. We, as researchers with a platform to amplify people’s stories, have a responsibility to honor such gifts by shaping their stories with them in a way that honors the original intentions of story sharing. This premise means that research projects should resist unidirectional, extractive methodologies (Grande, San Pedro, & Windchief, 2015; Patel, 2014; Tuck, 2009). By unidirectional, I mean to address Western research methodologies that have long bolstered objectivity, reliability, and “truth” by separating our stories, as researchers, from participant stories. Doing so, I have argued with others (Grande et al., 2015; San Pedro, Carlos, & Mburu, 2017), masks the power dynamics inherent in social settings and taints the “objectivity” researchers are seeking. Grande et al. (2015) ask: “What is at stake (and whose interests are served) in a power dynamic where only one person is asked to reveal him- or herself?” (p. 112). In such instances, researcher positionality, identity, and connections to the communities and people are glossed over, placed in footnotes, or omitted altogether.

Instead, Valerie Kinloch and I argue in two companion pieces that research methodologies ought to move toward Projects in Humanization, or PiH (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). Relying on the main tenets of Indigenous Research Methodologies (Francis, & Munson, 2017; Kovach, 2009; Windchief, & San Pedro, 2019), PiH seeks to re-center:

1. Relationships in research (both the creation and sustenance of relationships)
2. Co-construction of knowledge (the capacity to listen, story, and care about each other)
3. Story sharing (both the listening and voicing of stories)

Further, PiH disrupt inequitable Western research systems by establishing more interconnected, inclusive, Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies, which emphasize shared desires toward “racial, linguistic, educational, political, and social justice in schools and communities” (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017, p. 374S). When our stories, life experiences, and racial identities are shared with those we work with, knowledge is co-constructed because we listen closely and carefully to the stories of others, which, over time, leads to ongoing opportunities for trust and relationship building. A large part of trust-building requires that we include participant voices during the analysis, write-up, and sharing of our knowledges with imagined audiences beyond us (e.g., Curwood, 2019; San Pedro et al., 2017).

PiH move beyond the method of member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994), which is the act of checking in or taking data and conclusions back to participants to see if there is some truth to what researchers are experiencing, analyzing, interpreting, and seeing. PiH also move beyond Tracy’s (2010) suggestion that, rather than using the term member checking, which “assumes
there is some universal truth that we are seeking,” we instead engage in member reflection—the investigation of “meaning making at this point in their lives, which will change” (p. 844). In the instances of both member checking and member reflection, the fact that our experiences, as researchers, impact what we see and how we see are left out of the discussion. Such omissions often lead to research publications that are steeped in deficit paradigms and concurrently continue to center whiteness as an ideology and settler colonialism in educational research (Patel, 2014; Tuck, 2009). In both methods (member checking and member reflection), the “truth” lies in bringing stories back to participants to ask for clarity and to make meaning; however, neither method discusses where relationships are located, who researchers are, and why they are seeking to explore knowledge in the areas of focus (see Baker-Bell, 2017; Brooks, 2017; Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017; Jang, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Martinez, 2017).

In their editorial opening to a special issue in the Journal of Literacy Research, Johnson, Gibbs Grey, and Baker-Bell (2017) make this point clear as they center their experiences as scholars of color:

> We carry our raced, classed, and gendered formations into our classrooms [and research settings]. Our prior knowledge and experiences inform our philosophy of education, our conceptualization of language and literacy, and our understanding of what it means to be a literacy researcher in today’s racialized and gendered contexts. As a result, our multiple identities cannot be detached from who we are.” (p. 469, emphasis added).

We affect and are affected by others; such impacts ought to emphasize “how relationships can inform educational research and contribute to PiH that forward our stories, lives, and realities” (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017, p. 381S). Further, Patel (2015) urges scholars to be “answerable” to communities, to people, to the stories shared. This answerability—or as Hermann-Wilmarth, & Ryan (this issue, p. 392) inquire, “Who is our work accountable to? Who does it empower?”—asks us to treat stories as sacred gifts offered when trust is built and sustained; we have an obligation to share those gifts given to us in a way that honors our relationships with participants, and in a way that connects our experiences and stories to theirs.

For me, that has meant sharing, openly and honestly, my identity in construction; it has meant answering questions that those I am working with ask me; it has meant seeking partnerships with participants who have shared storied lessons with me that have changed and shaped who I am; it’s meant listening closely and carefully to the ways their stories hold answers to larger systems that oppress; it’s meant that through those partnerships, I seek to center the co-. By co-, I mean co-analyzing data, co-constructing ideas, and co-authoring those revelations with those I have had the honor to work with. The co- also refers to the space between youth and me where dialogic relationships are created, crafted, and sustained through multiple moments of vulnerability, trust building, and storying (Francis & Munson, 2017; Kovach, 2009). Through careful consideration of the ways the co- is constructed, research moves away from tired notions that reliable, objective data can be achieved when researchers omit their positionalities, identities, and
ways of knowing and seeing from the study. Instead, I argue that research ought to move toward Projects in Humanization that center the multiple truths shared between people. Those “truths,” though fleeting and temporary, do exist within a moment and are very much dependent upon the location of relationships that are built and sustained over time. In this way, research becomes less about extraction—collecting data, profiting from it, and leaving a research setting with little to no reciprocation—and more about dialogic interaction where relationships continue in the co-. Our stories are connected; research ought to ground those connections in the space between us.

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### Shifting Boundaries, Digitally Mediated Spaces, and Ethical Considerations in Literacy Research

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Who we are, what we do, how we navigate the world is increasingly inseparable from the ways in which we use digital technologies and inhabit online spaces. As researchers traverse the boundaries between the real and the virtual, we must grapple with interrelated theoretical, methodological, and ethical challenges at each step in the inquiry process. Our work to understand the intersection of literacy, identity, and creativity often depends on our capacity to follow individuals, texts, and tools across time and space, and our ability to make sense of their lives on and off the
A growing amount of literacy research is now situated in field sites that are digitally mediated, which means that researchers are no longer geographically or temporally restricted in terms of their access to potential participants and data sources (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). However, this presents new ethical considerations related to issues such as recruiting participants, maintaining confidentiality, and establishing trust and rapport. As Timothy San Pedro, Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarith, and Caitlin L. Ryan (this issue) argue, it also demands that we critically reflect on how we conceptualize risk, cultivate partnerships, and value the humanity within our work.

In many ways, ethical complexities are magnified for researchers in digitally mediated spaces. Over the past fifteen years, I have wrestled with ethical challenges in my own research, including my recent work as the Chair of the Humanities Ethics Committee and a Research Integrity Adviser at the University of Sydney. Here, I want to raise questions related to how literacy research in online spaces needs to account for (and be accountable to) our research contexts, our participants, and ourselves.

If we conceptualize a field site as a “network composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects” (Burrell, 2009, p. 189), we can appreciate how it may involve multiple spaces and shifting boundaries. The idea of a network offers a way to understand the multifaceted interactions that constitute reading, writing, designing, and meaning-making in both formal and informal contexts. Such spaces can be both malleable and ephemeral, and they often disrupt any static notion of a field site. To move inquiry forward, researchers need to “interrogate” their methods, “innovate” for the context, and “explicate” their approaches to data analysis” (Magnifico, Curwood, & Lammers, in press). Because networked field sites are dynamic (Gerber, Abrams, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2017) and foster emergent meaning-making (Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Phillips, 2017), researchers need to consider the ethical challenges of their work as they study literacy practices and reflect upon their implications for individuals and communities. As a literacy researcher, I have had access to years of online interactions in spaces like Instagram (Kovalik & Curwood, in press), Twitter (Biddolph & Curwood, 2016), and Tumblr (Curwood, 2014), which has provided rich data sources and insights into how texts and interactions shape teachers’ learning processes and youths’ literacy practices. Yet networked field sites can disappear overnight; for instance, the online writing community that Elizabeth Padgett and I explored in our study of poetic literacy no longer exists (Padgett & Curwood, 2016). How can researchers navigate the ethics approval process at their universities, when their very field sites may be rapidly changing and evolving? How can we recruit participants, establish rapport, and build partnerships with individuals and online communities? Why do we need to consider how we live our own lives on the screen, as we share our stories, our images, and our identities with our research participants?

Collecting data and reporting findings can be problematic in networked field sites. For example, our ongoing research into fanfiction writing and the interactions between writers and reviewers in online spaces has led my colleagues and
I to carefully consider issues related to maintaining confidentiality (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013). If we quote directly from a creative work, our participants’ online names are readily accessible; with a few other searches and clicks, their real identities are often easily uncovered. In an effort to protect our youth participants, this has meant that we have chosen not to include extensive direct quotations from their online creative writing unless we have informed consent. However, it has encouraged us to be explicit about our innovative multistage approach to linguistic analysis in order to support further investigation into audience interaction (Magnifico, Curwood, & Lammers, 2015). How can researchers respect confidentiality, especially in networked field sites where the contexts, names, and texts may quickly change? What are the implications for the dissemination of literacy research, for fostering credibility and trustworthiness, and for, in Timothy San Pedro’s words, cultivating dialogic interactions?

Because a growing body of literacy scholarship takes place within online environments and through digital tools, researchers need to ensure that they continually ask critical questions of their ethical practices (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). We need to:

- Establish *rapport* with our research participants, so we are invited into their lives within digitally mediated and geographically distributed communities.
- Demonstrate *respect* for cultural practices, local traditions, and individual voices to foster research that is fair and equitable.
- Engage in *reciprocity* to promote thoughtful dialogue around emergent ethical challenges.
- Share *responsibility* for the development of field-specific guidelines and university requirements related to the ethical conduct of research in digitally mediated spaces.
- Commit to ongoing *reflection* about our ethical choices and the consequences for our participants as well as the implications for our research.

We need to take part in ongoing critical dialogue related to these issues, and consider how university policies and expectations, as well as the field’s methodological approaches and inquiry frameworks, can set precedents and protect participants while also moving scholarship forward in new and innovative directions. And we need to ask ourselves: Where is the humanity in online human subjects research?

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