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## **Participatory Action Research, Sacred Existential Epistemology, the Eighth Moment of Qualitative Research and Beyond...**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses how, in a doctoral study, a collaborative methodology employing Participatory Action Research was embraced, upholding respectful relationships and partnerships that generated co-construction of change in two preschool settings. Participatory Action Research signifies an epistemology that underpins the belief that knowledge is embedded in social relationships and is most influential when produced collaboratively through action. This paper also explains how the research group moved away from the label of feminist poststructuralist researchers towards a feminist communitarian ethic. Such an ethic is underpinned by a sacred existential epistemology that values empowerment, morally involved observers, shared governance, love, care, community, solidarity and civic transformation. This epistemology is based on a philosophical anthropology that affirms all human beings, without exception, are worthy of dignity and 'sacred status'. The paper concludes by locating the research firmly in what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) refer to as the eighth moment of qualitative research. This moment is marked by researchers concerned with social justice, liberation methodology and moral purpose.

### **Introduction**

This qualitative study was informed by feminist research perspectives where central to the inquiry was the social construction of gender, race, class and (dis)ability and how these powerful shaping forces may be exposed, critiqued and challenged using children's literature during storytime sessions in two preschool settings to enhance preschoolers' awareness of and sensitivities to social justice issues. Like all feminist research this research project was overtly political and the values of antiracism, antisexism and anticlassism were ever apparent and permeated the inquiry (Harding, 1986; Lather, 1991, 1992, 2000; Mac Naughton, 2001; Olesen, 2005; St. Pierre, 2000). This inquiry fits Vidich and Lyman's (2000) prophecy that in the new postmodern era qualitative researchers will do more than observe history; they will play an integral part in it where reflections of the researchers' direct and personal involvement will be written into the reported findings of their research.

This paper reports on the importance of collaborative inquiry to this research project. Collaboration was not only significant in addressing the research question of how children's literature could be employed during storytime sessions to enhance preschoolers' awareness of and sensitivities to social justice issues; but it also became the catalyst for developing an epistemological and philosophical framework and model for the study.

### **Establishing the Research Design**

Most qualitative research literature mirrors the features of qualitative research put forward by Eisner in 1991 (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2005; Patton, 2002; Wiersma, 2000). Firstly, qualitative studies tend to be field focused and reflect researchers as

instruments who engage in the situation and make sense of it. Secondly, qualitative researchers must possess the ability to interpret significant aspects, account for what they have observed and give voice to those in the situation studied using ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) to make meaning of shared experiences. Thirdly, researchers are not removed from the interpretation and writing, and their presence in the research process is made explicit. Lastly, qualitative studies pay attention to detail and context, providing a sense of the distinctiveness of the settings under study. The features of qualitative research identified by Eisner (1991) pay particular attention to the researchers’ position in the study. However, did his features allow for multiplicity of meaning? Did his features give all participants adequate ‘voice’?

The aim of this inquiry was to investigate strategies that would assist teaching for social justice in early childhood education. Therefore it was felt that the design of this investigation must be socially just for all participants, allowing each a ‘voice’ and honouring and respecting individual history, knowledge, expertise and understandings. As a researcher I did not wish to stand apart from participants in this study, as one looking through a microscope. I wished to become part of their everyday lived experience: “being with and for [the participants], not looking at [them]” (de Laine, 2000, p. 16).

Walsh, Tobin and Graue’s (1991, p. 465) admonition that “as researchers, we have measured people, but we have not listened to them” troubled me. I did not wish to view participants in this research project as objects of study (in the positivist sense). I wanted to value their knowledge, expertise and voices. I wanted to understand their human lived experience. Most importantly I wanted to engage with participants as ‘co-investigators’ in dialogues and conversations that would shed light on how to address and investigate the research aims.

Lather (2001, p. 92) argues that “change-enhancing, advocacy approaches to inquiry, based on what Bernstein (1983, p.128) terms ‘enabling’ versus ‘blinding’ prejudices on the part of the researcher, have much to offer as we begin to grasp the possibilities of the postpositivist era.” Therefore, I took up Lather’s challenge to find a change-enhancing approach that would be enabling for all participants.

Bell (2000) identifies action research as a research design that has become particularly attractive to educators because of its practical, problem-solving emphasis, because practitioners carry out the investigation and because the investigation is directed towards greater understanding and improvement of their own practice. Action research is about exploring with stakeholders to generate and study change in and through the investigative process. According to Mac Naughton (2001, p.208) action research “can produce changed ways of doing things and changed ways of understanding why we do what we do”. Action research became appealing to me as a research design; however, I did not fully understand how I (as the researcher) could fit into this type of investigation. I found reassurance in Fine et al.’s (2004) insistence that researchers must recognise that the co-construction of knowledge and the material gathered from, with and on any community – including a preschool – constitute a participatory process.

The term **participatory process** emphasises the fact that research need not be ‘done on’ subjects but can be a collaborative practice. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 29)

contend “action, participatory, and activist-orientated research is on the horizon”. My philosophy seemed to align with this new direction of qualitative research where together stakeholders and researchers co-create knowledge that is realistic and pragmatically useful and is rooted in local understandings (Greenwood & Levin, 2005). My desire was that this research project would be enabling for all participants. This meant that all participants would be afforded a valued voice, debate and discussion would be encouraged, action agreed upon collaboratively would be promoted and each participant would be represented in every stage of the project. It appeared that I was looking for a research design that would in itself become a social practice. Therefore, I sought a research design that would encourage a social process of collaborative learning and transformation, open communicative space (Habermas, 1996), uphold prior knowledge and listen to and value the voice of each participant. Gergen and Gergen (2003) contend that the most obvious response to critical concerns regarding representation is empowerment research and cite Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the most developed genre of this type.

### **Participatory Action Research**

PAR is a relatively new and collaborative approach to action research (Torres, 2004). A brief examination of the history of action research delineates the research design’s evolution. The history of action research can be traced in terms of “generation” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 560). Kurt Lewin’s earliest writings on action research in the 1940s outlined community action research projects in the United States; however, positivistic principles dominated United States research at the time which influenced a temporary decline in action research studies (Kemmis, 1981). A second generation of action research involving organisational development began in Britain around the early 1970s. However, a third generation of action researchers from Australia and Europe raised the initiative for more open, critical and emancipatory action research (Carr & Kemmis 1986). A fourth generation of action research emerged through social movements in the developing world supported by such notable activists as Orlando Fals Borda (1988) and Paulo Freire (1996).

Mac Naughton (2001, p. 210) believes fourth generation action research “should embody educational transformation and emancipation by working with others to change existing social practices and by using critical reflection and social criticism as key research processes. It is therefore collaborative, change-orientated and overtly political”.

This research project easily aligned itself with the fourth generation of action research. However, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p. 563) have identified a “new generation of critical participatory action research” that emerged during the 1990s as part of a dialogue aimed at critiquing itself and providing a frame of reference for understanding. This research project also aligns with this new generation of action research by critiquing its own process and journey through collaborative discussions, reflection and reflexivity.

The application of PAR was appropriate for this study because it was a means of producing knowledge and of improving practice through its collaborative nature: the direct involvement of participants in setting the schedule, data collection and analysis, and use of findings (Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2001). PAR is influential in the social justice movement (Torres, 2004)

and therefore very appropriate to this study, because its participative nature and transformative action allowed teachers and children to understand their worlds critically by actively and collectively shaping and reshaping them through exploration of social justice issues in children's literature to understand these issues better.

PAR signifies a position within qualitative research methods; an epistemology that believes knowledge is embedded in social relationships and most influential when produced collaboratively through action (Fine et al., 2004b). To this end, the following cyclical, spiralling action research process was undertaken: observation, reflection, collaboration and/or theory building, planning (based on observation, reflection and collaboration), implementation of planned action, re-observation, re-reflection, re-collaboration, re-planning, re-implementation... (Bell, 2000; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2001). This spiral is obviously the central feature of action research; however, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) identified seven further key features of PAR that warrant an understanding as they are couched in this research project:

1. PAR is a social practice: It identifies that “no individuation is possible without socialisation, and no socialisation is possible without individuation” (Habermas, 1992, p. 26). Therefore the processes of individuation and socialisation persist in shaping individuals, social relationships and social practices. PAR is a process whereby people endeavour to understand their situations and continually examine and re-examine their situations with the aim of improvement. In this study teachers, assistants and I worked together with the students to investigate the processes of teaching and learning in the preschool classroom to improve understandings of and sensitivities to social justice issues.
2. PAR is participatory: PAR is not research done ‘on’ someone else. It is collaborative and engages participants in examining their own understandings, skills and values (their knowledge) and the ways in which they construe themselves and their actions in their social worlds and practices. PAR encourages participants to reflect critically on how their current knowledge structures and limits their action. In this research project PAR encouraged the teachers, assistants and me to reflect on ourselves as individuals and as a group to explore our philosophies and prior knowledge and make explicit how these frames of reference underpinned our classroom and research practices.
3. PAR is practical and collaborative: PAR is a process in which participants investigate practices which are often taken for granted with the intent of exposing any part of these practices that may be unproductive, unsatisfying and/or unjust with the further aim of improvement. This study used PAR to examine storytime in preschool settings (an often taken for granted social practice) with the aim of reconstructing this practice for the advancement of teaching for social justice.
4. PAR is emancipatory: PAR “aims to help people recover, and release themselves from, the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying *social structures* that limit self-development and self-determination” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 567; *emphasis in original*). This study discovered that the social practice of storytime in each preschool classroom was indeed in need of improvement. It was unproductive and unsatisfying with the only rationale being that storytime was used as a simple

transition activity. The teachers and assistants intervened to release themselves from the constraints of this social practice with the view of improving the practice for themselves, the preschoolers and their preschool communities.

5. PAR is critical: PAR is a means of critically examining the social world deliberately to uncover, contest and reconstitute unjust, unsatisfying and unproductive practices. The research design itself is critical in that it is continually examining itself to encourage just practice; and at the same time it investigates ways in which language and social relationships can contest and reconstitute unjust and unproductive practices. For this study this meant that as a research team we were constantly checking our processes and interpretations to ensure just practices. It also meant that we engaged preschoolers in critically examining picture books to contest and reconstitute unjust practices.
6. PAR is reflexive: PAR is a conscious process through which people aim to transform their practices through a cyclical, spiralling process of critical self- and group reflection. This research project embraced the cyclic nature of PAR to reflect upon and examine how storytime and children's literature might raise awareness of and sensitivities to social justice issues thus transforming both practice and personal lives.
7. PAR aims to be transformative in both theory and practice:

Participatory action research involves reaching out from the specifics of particular situations, as understood by the people within them, to explore the potential of different perspectives, theories and discourses that might help to illuminate particular practices and practical settings as a basis for developing critical insights and ideas about how things might be transformed. Equally it involves reaching in from the standpoints provided by different perspectives, theories, and discourses to explore the extent to which they provide practitioners themselves with a critical grasp of the problems and issues they actually confront in specific local situations. Thus, PAR aims to transform both practitioners' theories and practices and the theories and practices of others whose perspectives and practices may help to shape the conditions of life and work in particular local settings (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 568).

This current research project may connect the local settings of two preschool classrooms with other preschool classrooms engaging in the social practice of storytime. It may assist in transforming this social practice into one that enhances the teaching of social justice issues.

The cyclical, spiralling nature of PAR with the above seven key features became the methodological framework on which this research project was constructed. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 384) confirm that "work in this tradition attempts to make qualitative research more humanistic, holistic, and relevant to the lives of human beings. This worldview sees human beings as co-creating their reality through participation, experience and action". To this end PAR was employed as a research design that allowed participants to re-examine storytime in their preschool settings to bring about positive change.

It must be acknowledged that PAR has potential criticisms, or encumbrances, most of which confronted this research project and needed to be addressed. A major hurdle, and a large deterrent for potential participant co-researchers, is the time commitment involved in participation. This inquiry required a huge commitment on the part of its participants. During intense data gathering over an eleven week school term weekly PAR meetings, involving observations and analyses of videotaped storytime sessions and reflections on field and journal notes, consumed many hours. Fortnightly PAR meetings were held during the ten week orientation phase, and also fortnightly meetings were held for ten weeks after the intense data gathering for support in continuing the research findings. Another stumbling block to studies such as this is the fact that teacher co-researchers may be daunted by the fact (especially at the beginning of the study) that their teaching practices are to be scrutinised. A further difficulty is that honouring all voices is not necessarily an easy process. There may be personality clashes, priority clashes and power plays. Like any investigation involving human beings PAR may be affected by the human condition; for example: sickness, loss of enthusiasm or attrition due to moving from the location under study. However, because PAR attracts participant co-researchers of like mind much of the above is over-ridden by the sincere desire to transform their worlds. This is not to say that these criticisms should be down-played. This inquiry did experience the above encumbrances occasionally; however, because the team was committed to the research project from the beginning and because the research process was open, critically caring and supportive, problems were satisfactorily and empathetically addressed. Social justice orientated research, such as this inquiry, requires its co-researchers to assume a moral obligation that support one another and all participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1118).

All participants had a declared interest in investigating strategies that would enhance teaching for social justice in their classrooms. Each member of the PAR team (two preschool directors, a preschool teacher, two teacher assistants and myself) professed to be feminist poststructuralist researchers coming from the epistemological position taken up as *feminist standpoint theories of knowledge* (Lather, 2001) whereby there are multiple standpoints relating to culture, class, race, (dis)ability and sexual orientation and that knowledge arises out of the struggle against oppression. The PAR team wished to challenge the *status quo* through the investigation of children's literature during storytime sessions in their preschool classrooms to uphold diversity, difference and human dignity, the latter of which was added during the course of our collaborative research (the reason for this is explained later in this paper). Constrain

Through PAR and collaboration, participants discovered strategies for employing children's literature to enhance preschoolers' understandings of and sensitivities to social justice issues and identify social injustices. It was through this collaboration and reflective conversations that the PAR team began delving deeply into our individual and collective philosophies of what it "means to know" (Lather, 1992, p. 92), our epistemological grounding. As mentioned previously we believed that each member of the team supported the epistemological position taken up as feminist standpoint theories of knowledge. However, conversations, dialogues and reflections during the orientation phase of the inquiry encouraged us to research our epistemological position further. This led us to examine whether the label of feminist poststructuralist researchers and our epistemological underpinnings still 'fit' us as researchers. Were these labels too constraining? During initial meetings to expound

our research it became apparent that we were incorrect in labelling ourselves feminist poststructuralists as we were privileging the standpoint of an ‘ethic of care’ and teaching for social justice over other perspectives. We found the work of Clifford Christians (1995, 1997, 1998, 2003, 2005), Nel Noddings (1995) and Maxine Greene (1995) illuminating. They expounded the term “feminist communitarianism” that emphasises an ‘ethic of care’. Therefore we used feminist communitarianism as a model to continue research prior to data collection. Although the team felt that we were indeed already employing most of the features of this model, the term afforded us a firm foundation to base our inquiry in an ethic of care. Feminist communitarianism is underpinned by a sacred existential epistemology.

### **Feminist Communitarianism and Sacred Existential Epistemology**

It may appear ‘upside down’ to discuss the epistemology and model that the research team followed **after** discussing the research design; however, it was only after the PAR team began collaborating that we truly reflected upon what was driving us, both collectively and individually. Like most action research it was not only the research questions that were investigated but also our philosophies and the way partnerships and relationships were supported and maintained (Goldstein, 2000; Ryan & Campbell, 2001).

Because the team privileged the standpoint of an ‘ethic of care’ and teaching for social justice over other perspectives we found ourselves embracing feminist communitarianism and moving towards a sacred, existential epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2005). This epistemology involved a community with common moral values, with the research being grounded in concepts of care, kindness, solidarity, empowerment, shared governance, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers and civic transformation (Christians, 2003). Sacred existential epistemology allies well with the epistemology of PAR and also with our philosophies borrowed from such thinkers as Noddings (1995) and Nussbaum (1990) who believed in the importance of an ‘ethic of care’. However, because the term ‘sacred’ had religious overtones some team members were troubled. Consensus was met by the research team’s definition of sacred to mean ‘respect and reverence’. Therefore the team believed in and worked towards this sacred epistemology based on a philosophical anthropology affirming that “all humans are worthy of dignity and sacred status without exception for class or ethnicity” (Christians, 1995, p.29). The research team added gender and (dis)ability to Christians’ affirmation. Hence the team revised our aim of encouraging the celebration of difference and diversity to include human dignity. It appears Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 1087) had predicted our direction by stating “a postmodern, feminist, poststructural communitarian science will move closer to a sacred science of the moral universe”. According to Christians (2003, 2005), a sacred epistemology identifies, questions and challenges the ways in which gender, race and class operate as significant systems of oppression in today’s world. This sat well with our inquiry. Therefore the epistemological underpinning and philosophical framework for our research project were established by the research team before the completion of the orientation phase.

This sacred existential epistemology underpins a feminist, communitarian ethic that Denzin and Lincoln (2003) endorsed and that our research team embraced. It calls for trusting, collaborative, non-oppressive relationships among co-researchers. “Such an ethic presumes that investigators are committed to recognising personal

accountability, the value of individual expressiveness and caring, the capacity for empathy, and the sharing of emotionality” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 52).

The above needed to be regarded on multiple levels in this research project. The research team consisted of six team members, five of whom were co-researchers and at the same time having their teaching practice scrutinised; preschool children were involved; parents were consulted; I was facilitator, for want of a better term [Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) have also struggled for a better term for the university researcher involved in PAR]. Therefore it was necessary for the team to not only build collaborative, trusting relationships based on empathy and compassion, but to also extend these values to the students and their parents. As the university member of the team, and the initiator of the study, it was important to me and the research project that all participants shared equal voice during this action research and the “complex web of power and privilege” (Goldstein, 2000, p. 521) was transparent. As an example of the difficulties and complexities involved in this I will highlight my own position in this inquiry: as a university researcher I had no power in the preschool classroom; yet I had the privilege of participating in the preschool day and observing storytime sessions. As a university researcher I had power of access to the world of academia and afforded team members the privilege to scrutinise this forum. As a university researcher this study is my doctorate; as a team member it is improving practice and I am accountable to the other members of the team, the preschoolers and their parents. As a university researcher I may have had the power to instigate the research and the power to write the research as a thesis; however, during the action research the power of how data were collected, when they were collected, how they were scrutinised and how they were used was in the hands of the team members who were accountable and responsible for those participating in the study: the preschoolers and one another. The concern of power and privilege is ever present in collaborative research (Goldstein, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Ryan & Campbell, 2001); however, each participant was committed to encouraging equity and equality with empathy, trust and care within the team. Therefore much of the concern regarding power and privilege was alleviated. This was brought about through much open debate, discussion, clarification and reflection on the part of each member of the PAR team. There were spaces for disagreement and simultaneously our discourse aimed for mutual understanding and the honouring of moral commitments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Each team member saw the importance of this investigation to their community.

Although much of the research that aligns with feminist communitarianism investigates the plight of the oppressed, we felt that it also fitted our inquiry in that we were a community with common moral values who wished to uphold these values in the wider community of each individual classroom and preschool. We wished to challenge the stereotyping of gender, race, class and (dis)ability that we had witnessed in the preschools. We wanted each preschool community to share the moral conviction that upholds and celebrates difference, diversity and human dignity.

Our widely shared moral convictions are developed through discourse within a community. These communities where moral discourse is nurtured and shared are a radical alternative to the utilitarian individualism of modernity. But in feminist communitarianism, communities are entered from the universal. The total opposite from an ethics of individual autonomy is universal human



solidarity. Our obligation to sustain one another defines our existence. The primal sacredness of all without exception is the heart of the moral order and the new starting point for our theorising (Christians, 2005, p. 154).

This ethical theory presumes that human identity is constructed through the sociocultural contexts with which one engages and where moral commitments, values and existential understandings are negotiated through communication. Research (such as this doctoral inquiry) supported by this theory, according to Christians (2003, p. 227), should be “collaborative in its design and participatory in its execution”, where participants are given a forum, enabling them to come to mutually held conclusions leading to community transformation. The research team believed that the design of PAR aligned well with the ethical theory underpinning feminist communitarianism.

Multiple moral and social spaces existed within the preschool communities and were examined against our ideals of a universal respect and reverence for the dignity of every human being regardless of gender, race, (dis)ability, age, culture or class (Christians, 1998, 2003, 2005; Denzin, 1997). Therefore our research team resisted those social values that were divisive and exclusivist (Christians, 2003) to uphold the sacredness of human dignity. As Noddings (1995, p. 365) argues

In direct opposition to the current emphasis on academic standards, a national curriculum, and national assessment...our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people... All children must learn to care for other human beings, and all must find an ultimate concern in some centre of care: care for self, for intimate others, for associates and acquaintances, for distant others...

If the main educational aim is, as Noddings (1995, p. 365) suggests, to “encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people” then should not educational research be investigating ways in which this ethic of care may be facilitated in educational settings? Denzin and Lincoln (2003, 2005) contend that much contemporary qualitative research in education is indeed concerned with moral and ethical discourse.

### **The Eighth Moment of Qualitative Research and Beyond...**

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) outline the complex historical field of qualitative research in terms of eight historical moments, with each moment flowing between and overlapping the others. They drew on research examples from all over the globe, including Australia, to highlight their point. My research inquiry is positioned firmly into Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005, p. 3) eighth historical moment of qualitative research, which is “concerned with moral discourse, with the development of sacred textualities” and where “social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalisation, freedom and community”. This current collaborative inquiry engaged a community of PAR inquirers and the communities of two preschools in moral discourse and critical conversations relating to race, culture, gender, class and (dis)ability to bring about change: the understandings of and sensitivities to these social justice issues; and the desire to uphold and celebrate difference, diversity and human dignity.

Characteristics of the new wave of qualitative research are reflected in this inquiry. The eighth moment upholds a concern for social justice issues and an ethic of communitarian, egalitarian and critical caring that underpin this research project. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 1118) argue that “the new participatory, feminist, and democratic values of interpretive qualitative research mandate a stance that is democratic, reciprocal, and reciprocating rather than objective and objectifying”. To this end my doctoral inquiry was conducted by, with and for participants who would use the understandings gleaned from the data gathered. A further characteristic of this new moment of qualitative research involves a “moral obligation on the part of the qualitative researchers, responsibility and obligation to participants, to respondents, to consumers of research, and to themselves as qualitative field-workers” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1118). The research team involved in my collaborative doctoral inquiry was responsible for and accountable to all stakeholders: one another, the students, the parents, the preschool communities. The research team was mindful of respectful relationships and the valuing of ‘voice’ for all involved.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) consider the eighth moment the “fractured future” which blurs the delineation between the eighth moment (which was the present in 2005) and the prospect of the ninth moment where, they predict, concerns for social justice, moral purpose and liberation methodology will continue. However, they envisage the ninth moment as a “scrimmage over federal ethics regulations” and overborne by funding issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1123). They believe also that these recent moments of qualitative research are, and will be, methodologically contested. On the one hand, randomised field trials, publicised as the ‘gold standard’ of scientific educational research, will engage the time of one faction of researchers while the quest of socially and culturally receptive and communitarian inquiries that are justice-oriented will occupy the other. Critics who accuse the later of disguising ideology as intellectual inquiry (Mosteller & Boruch, 2002) and who accuse Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) edited text of reflecting emotion rather than argument (Standish, 2005) may be challenged by the authors’ instance that “postpositivist inquirers of all perspectives and paradigms have joined in the collective struggle for a socially responsive, democratic, communitarian, moral, and justice-promoting set of inquiry practices and interpretive processes” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1123). Social justice and moral perspectives may invoke some emotive language and responses. One must look past these emotive responses to the imperative for research underpinned by such perspectives.

The future for qualitative researchers appears fraught with struggles surrounding ethics and funding and around the ongoing concern of representation. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue

On the one hand, creating open-ended, problematic, critical, polyphonic texts, given the linearity of written formats and the poststructural problem of the distance between representation and reality(ies), grows more difficult. On the other hand, engaging performative forms of social science can be difficult in many venues. Traditional texts are far more portable, albeit far less emotionally compelling. Performing social justice, examining ways in which our work can serve social justice, may be the teleological framework for a reimagined social science. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1124).

My collaborative inquiry fits into Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) teleological framework for a reimagined social science by examining ways in which teaching for social justice may be advanced in the early childhood classroom and community. It did this by respecting, valuing and giving 'voice' to participants in study. It is difficult to represent all participants' realities in research such as this. It is messy and problematic: 'such is life'...and is it not 'life' that social science research is all about?

### **Conclusion**

The collaborative research design of PAR not only assisted two preschool communities in guiding their students towards awareness of and sensitivities to social justice issues but also encouraged the research team to examine their individual and collective underpinnings for the inquiry. This paper outlined how the research group realigned itself with feminist communitarianism and was drawn towards a sacred existential epistemology. This epistemology gave sacred status to all human beings regardless of class, gender, race and (dis)ability and provided a philosophical framework for the study. A feminist communitarian ethic afforded the team a normative model which constituted human identity through the social realm and aligned particularly well with PAR. The epistemology, philosophy, design and model of this inquiry fitted in and between Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) eighth and ninth moments of qualitative research that are highlighted by concerns with social justice issues, culturally respectful and collaborative research and moral values combined with an ethic of care.

Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) imperative that inquiry practices and interpretive processes outlined in this paper, and that were embraced by this inquiry, should become part of the characteristic of qualitative research is of significance to contemporary educational research. The exploration for culturally sensitive, collaborative and inclusive research approaches is underway. Therein lay opportunities for further investigations into early childhood education and the teaching for social justice using participatory and collaborative approaches that respect and honour those involved in the study. The major obstacles of funding on the part of governing bodies and apathy on the part of possible participants (along with the other encumbrances already mentioned in this paper) must be addressed by researchers wishing to embrace socially and morally just inquiry practices. However, if researchers employ a feminist communitarian research model underpinned by a sacred existential epistemology they have no real alternative but to surmount these obstacles with the aim of positive change in the social world.

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