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Editorial: Emancipatory inquiry in educational research: models and methods for transformational learning

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Emancipatory inquiry in educational research: models and methods for transformational learning

Oppression and marginalization are consistent features across the globe, as are resistance, joy, and the pursuit of liberation. Throughout history social justice movements, social justice organizations, and scholars have acknowledged the potential and possibility of disciplined inquiry and research to highlight untold stories, illuminate goodness, expose power and colonialism, and offer pathways to greater equity and freedom.

Emancipatory research (also referred to as critical, anti-oppressive, or liberatory research) is an umbrella term that includes a wide set of research frameworks rooted in critical theory (e.g., critical feminist, disability, race, and queer theory) and an equally broad set of methods, often involving dialogue between individuals and/or ideas (e.g., narrative, arts-based, participatory, embodied, and action-oriented methods).¹ These frameworks and methodological approaches share a set of emancipatory objectives that include: (1) redefining who is the researcher and who is researched, (2) shifting whose forms of knowledge are valued and centralized, (3) being attentive and responsive to social power, privilege, and intersectional oppression, and (4) advancing social justice and pursuing liberation for marginalized and oppressed peoples.

Within education—an institutional space dominated by White Supremacy, cis-heteropatriarchy, ableism, and capitalism—emancipatory methods ask us to center the voices, wisdom, experiences and epistemologies of historically marginalized communities and to critique, resist, and deconstruct systems of power that continue to cause harm, violence, and marginalization to these groups. This approach to inquiry has a long history and tradition well beyond and outside of the academy. Using an emancipatory research lens in education, education researchers might ask: Who are the people (s) closest to the issue we are witnessing and how do we center their voices and experiences in the work? How can power shift from institutionally sanctioned “researchers” to communities at large? How can

¹ There is extensive literature describing the frameworks of critical theory and the methods that are drawn upon to investigate critical research questions. We cannot do these works justice in a short article, and therefore have opted not to try and capture their breadth with citations.

we collect data in humanizing ways, alongside others and not for them? How do we ensure that our research is “of use,” as [Piercy \(1973\)](#) and [Fine and Barreras \(2004\)](#) write? How can we imagine, vision, and build new ways of being and learning, within our research?

Building on prior work that describes the importance of emancipatory research in educational policy and practice, this special issue of *Frontiers* provides readers with concrete examples of critically oriented, qualitative methodological approaches in education research, and it explores the insights, learning, tensions and envisioning that are possible when one undertakes this type of research.

The first three articles in the special issue help us to reimagine data collection and analysis, from a more liberatory perspective. In the opening article, [Livingston](#) describes his unique qualitative methodological approach called *mixtaping* which merges arts informed research and hip-hop pedagogy to explore the lived experiences of Black male college students who identify as hip-hop artists. Drawing on their specific cultural sensibilities, each participant was invited to write and record an original hip-hop song, later compiled into a collaborative mixtape. Through dialogue with the students, [Livingston](#) asks: What does the creation of a Hip-Hop mixtape by Black, male, college-educated emcees, reveal about Black men’s experiences in higher education? Here, [Livingston](#) provides us with both a data collection method and a data analytic method that are designed to be culturally sustaining ([Paris and Alim, 2017](#)) and erode the culture of elitism in higher education. In the second piece, [Yohani et al.](#) describe a model of participatory research partnerships within refugee communities that seeks to interrupt dominant power dynamics of researcher and researched. Responding to critical calls for empowering communities to address humanitarian crises within their own sociopolitical contexts, [Yohani et al.](#) introduce us to Community Learning for Empowerment Groups (CLEGs)—a methodological and practical strategy that allows researchers and community members to jointly investigate, construct understandings of, and disseminate information about community-based solutions to psychosocial challenges. As a methodological approach to data collection and analysis, CLEGs shift power into the hands of those most impacted by the outcome of the research, while ensuring that local communities have access to prior research in their area of interest. In the third article, [Marien and Kirby](#) introduce us to the power rainbow—a tool for supporting upper-elementary school children to analyze systems of power. Emerging from the work of critical participatory action research ([Fine and Torre, 2021](#)), [Marien and Kirby](#) argue that one of the most complex parts of engaging in emancipatory methods with young children is supporting their understanding of the multi-layered ecology of power. The power rainbow is a methodological tool that helps children to visualize the nested systems of power at work in our world. As such, it supports children in engaging in critical power analysis. In different ways, each of the first three articles help us imagine how emancipatory methods can serve as both empirical and pedagogical innovations, supporting the co-construction of knowledge while also increasing the analytic capacity and understandings of those involved in the process.

The last two articles in the special issue build on these pieces, by taking us deeper into the experience of the researchers themselves. [Clark](#) introduces us to two arts-based methods that support her analytic process: creative writing and quilting. [Clark](#) uses these methods to engage in a process of senseMaking—an approach she uses “to make space within research in order to develop deeper ways of listening to participants” and herself. SenseMaking is not one methodological tool; rather, it is an analytic and reflexive strategy that is liberatory in its desire to carefully consider the intersecting experiences and insights of both research participants and researcher. By creating the time, space, and visual supports to carefully consider her own role in the analytic process, [Clark](#) draws out additional lessons for policymakers and researchers in the field of special education. Finally, [Lozenski and Chikkatur](#) invite us into their lives as emancipatory researchers embedded in neoliberal institutions of higher education. Their piece uses the frame of chronopolitics ([Cooper, 2017](#); [Mills, 2020](#)) to help us consider the tensions that university researchers face when trying to navigate the rhythms and requirements of higher education, while continuing to prioritize the liberatory aims of their broader communities. They encourage us to think about ways to bend time and center joy, as we work to build the relationships and contexts necessary for emancipatory research practices to flourish.

As a set, the articles in this special issue help demonstrate how critical methods in education serve as pathways for deeper learning and social change through their impact on the researchers themselves, their participants, and the communities and institutions within which they are embedded. It is our hope that they might catalyze a dialogue among researchers and practitioners about the pedagogical and epistemological assumptions that underlie their work, their definitions of rigor, partnership and knowledge, and how they conceptualize the relationship between research, practice and justice.

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