



MEETING THE CHALLENGES
Interdisciplinary research for global development



DSA-ESRC Workshop series 2018-19

Educational Inequality, Poverty and Development
Convened by Tigist Grieve

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Summary Report, Sarah C. White, 1 May 2019

Perhaps paradoxically, our fifth workshop on educational inequality, poverty and development, laid considerable emphasis on the need to 'unlearn' as much as to learn. This involves disinterring the 'folk knowledge' of the global North which is embedded in the basic concepts different disciplines use to understand the world and the ways they apply those concepts in practice. It also applies to the processes of research, with both those who habitually assume the lead, and those who habitually assume the agenda will be set by others, needing to unlearn their default settings. Researchers need to recognise that they are the observed, as much as observers, with responsibilities not to leave communities in which they work 'feeling wasted'. Convenient labels like 'the global South' can hide differentiation and injustice, including the capture of global research by a very few elite national universities. There were also strong challenges from UK-based development NGOs, that they have found academic research often of little practical use, with demands of time, procedures and output that don't fit well with the needs of the field.

Of the 30 participants, 5 were based in East Africa, one in China, and the others in the UK. 21 participants were academics, mainly in Education, alongwith social work, policy studies, anthropology and health. Six were primarily engaged in advocacy or practice, and three were research or network managers or co-ordinators.

1. What can we learn about interdisciplinary work from educational research?

The importance of working across disciplines was widely accepted: 'We are expected to go beyond ourselves.' This means a certain humility, accepting the need to work with others with different kinds of skill and expertise. When interdisciplinary research is effective, however, it can also lead to great confidence, that a problem or issue has been comprehensively examined. This is a strong basis on which to produce credible policy output, especially where end users and practitioners have been involved throughout the process. However, interdisciplinary research can also be messy, with no clear divisions between programmes, and everyone seeking the same pot of funding. This is particularly the case where people are not doing research out of their own interest, but only because there is money available for a particular piece of research to be done.

Like other social scientists, education specialists may find themselves drafted in to manage 'the back end' of natural science projects, to bring communities in, address people's (perceived) 'misbehaviour', or encourage them to adopt an innovation designed by others. Engagement may be quite limited, as Professor Chege put it, you 'give your package' and walk away. But there is also something inherently interdisciplinary about education: it concerns teaching and learning, whatever the particular subject might be. This gives no guarantee against specialists in other disciplines being defended and defensive. One participant described arguing that you do not need to be a lawyers to teach lawyers – we all can learn from each other. Another described how a successful collaboration between engineering and education had enabled secondary school teachers to begin teaching engineering – but some key personnel would need to change before the programme could be expanded to further levels.

Methods, concepts and contexts

Concern was expressed that quantitative approaches were once more capturing esteem and funding, while qualitative research is in fact vital. Research using 'big data' could reinforce dependence on Northern expertise. For others, the critical issue was not methods but concepts. In this view, interdisciplinary work is most challenging because of underlying differences in conceptualisation or philosophies of how the world is and what matters, which may be so taken for granted that they are never explicitly stated. This makes collaboration across disciplines difficult for a start. Additionally, however, as the disciplines have largely been developed in the North, they inevitably carry the marks of that context in the way they have been conceived and operationalized. This was illustrated in the context of PhD research on education and social mobility in Pakistan. Not only was it necessary to disinter the core assumptions underlying critical disputes between economics and sociology, but also to produce an alternative to class as the key unit of analysis for understanding social mobility in the context of rural south Asia. The 'schizophrenic shifts in reality' required in undertaking such fundamental archaeologies of knowledge are disorientating, and the need to avoid sacrificing depth in capturing interdisciplinary breadth poses significant challenge.

This was just one example of a repeated stress on the importance of context. People expressed concern about universal prescriptions or policy models that could be 'rolled out' across the world. Highly priced 'super-foods' to treat a malnourished child ignored the fact that a mother would use that amount for feeding the whole family. Malnutrition is not about the individual child but the whole context.

Education for public policy, it was suggested, should involve not just training in particular frameworks or techniques, but also exposure to novels and films, which can give a sense of the texture and flavour of unfamiliar contexts. For students from the global South, it might also be an encouragement to see the name of someone from their own country on a reading list dominated by Northern academics!

Transdisciplinary?

For some people, the idea of interdisciplinarity was not enough, as it could not address the relative status of different disciplines. What was needed was a queering of the field, resulting in a transdisciplinary approach, which fundamentally problematises all disciplinary boundaries and constructions.

Some objected that this could just lead to the formation of a new discipline. Others cautioned that 'transdisciplinary' is sometimes used to refer to joint academic/practitioner research. Some might say that it is appropriate that this particular term's meaning should be variously interpreted!

2. What dynamics characterise North-South and East-South research?

One presentation described the African Education Research database which brings together all the research done by researchers from Sub Saharan Africa on the region, using mainly English language databases. 40% involved researchers outside Africa and two thirds of those were from the UK or US (followed by Netherlands). ¼ of those with US/UK collaborators were lead authors while ¾ of the African researchers with collaborators from the Netherlands were lead authors. Only ¼ of the academics were female, and this was constant whether there was an international partnership or not. Where African researchers had initiated partnerships the terms tended to be more equitable. Amongst N/S partnerships, in 50% the Southern researchers reported their role as data collectors.

Asked whether North-south or East-south partnerships were preferable, an East African researcher laughingly replied that they were similar in that both the money was not coming from the South! However, the style of research was different. In East-South research there was a much stronger cultural element, with, for example, southern researchers visiting the homes of their Japanese partners. This was likened to Maasai bridewealth practices, where the tariff may be set at 500 head of cattle, but they are transferred one at a time, to signify – and embody – an ongoing state of relatedness.

In North-south partnerships the ideas still predominantly come from the North but the South has the responsibility to work out how to put these into practice, manage fieldwork funds and make the research work in communities. This gives considerable de facto power over the research process.

South-north research must be around the corner, where people from the South say 'These are our issues, can we collaborate on these?' If the funding imbalance is solved, the question then will be what the Northern researchers have to bring to the table.

Misunderstandings

People talked of a number of common tensions. As one East African described it, the basic pattern is from the North: 'Why does the South not understand?' and from the South, 'Why do they take no notice of what we have known for generations?'

There was need for more recognition of the institutional limitations Southern researchers face, rather than putting the blame on individuals. One male senior academic was quoted:

'Projects gets delayed, you feel embarrassed, but you don't want to tell your partners because you don't want to shame your university or even your country. Your partner can blame you for non-delivery and I am considered not a good collaborator from then on.'

'Moving at the speed of trust'

A Northern participant shared his experience of using collaborative enquiry to improve educational outcomes for the most marginalised. It was, he said, his most exciting experience of research ever. Funded by a US philanthropic foundation, the objective was to be East Africa led and to reverse the polarity of global knowledge. The project was the brainchild of a Kenyan woman [unnamed]. More than 50 organisations were involved, mainly NGOs and some universities, with the aim to develop a learning agenda. Organisations are grouped within country-based thematic groups, with combined face to face meetings and virtual learning events. There is mentoring to support becoming learning organisations and facilitators to deepen learning (learning catalyts), with meetings at country and regional level.

There were some issues between the NGOs, who were competitors not just collaborators. But more significantly, it was hard for the organisations to believe that the donor didn't have any agenda, that it simply wanted to facilitate their learning on their own terms. It was hard for them to exercise the freedom to lead. It was hard to work against the dominant ways these things are done. Progress therefore was slow: 'moving at the speed of trust.'

Where is the state?

Participants remarked on the erosion of the role of the state, both conceptually and practically. Where is the conceptualisation of the role of the nation state in education and social mobility studies? In practical terms also public services and the public sector are inadequate, but people nonetheless retain a sense of entitlement to basic services.

3. What makes for effective partnership?

Tigist Grieve reported on her study with southern researchers. These identified the benefits of collaboration:

'When you have a partner interested to work with research or practical problems that helps your institute, it is like having an extra pair of eyes. You see problems in new ways and the opportunity can be an eye opener' (*Female, senior academic*)

'I find being in a workshop and spending my time in collaborative thinking is morale boosting. You feel inspired and energised to take things on board and do things better than before.' (*Female, junior academic*)

She also emphasised how important was mutual capacity development, not taking a deficit view on Southern partners:

'Sometimes, you find [universities in the North] are sending junior researchers deemed fit to build our capacity, even short-term mentoring. Are we truly short of mentors here? To me capacity building is not about flying researchers to practice on us here but to put the resources directly here and enable the country based mentoring schemes' (*Male, senior academic*)

The value of mentorship was also emphasised by others – not in terms of forming people in your own image, but out of the need to share particular skills and forms of knowledge. Everyone needs some mentorship as no-one understands everything. The readiness to ‘unlearn’ was also seen as necessary for transformation: ‘Capacity development – that’s the space for *unlearning* as well as learning.’

Many people emphasised the importance of building relationships over time: ‘The longer you work together the more genuinely partnershipy they become.’

4. What is the impact of research on the people who are researched?

While impact has become a major issue in research circles in the North, it is generally considered in quite general terms, as referring to policy, national, or even international level. In our discussions the East African researchers led us to consider the impact of research more locally. This involved recognising that researchers are observed, as well as observers. For example, as one participant walked round with the research team she heard local people muttering:

‘What is the purpose of these people coming and just wasting our time?’

‘These are the people who walk around here to come and see how the poor live.’

People living in poverty also know about international measures like the \$1.25 per day poverty line and they ask about it: ‘How can we live on this? How do you justify this figure?’

Giving something back

Many research contracts state that payment cannot be made to interviewees. This sets up the dilemma that you are taking people’s time and not paying them anything for it. On the other hand, if people know that they will be paid, you run the danger of people just coming forward to get the money, rather than because they have important experience to share. One way to resolve this is to pay at the end, and to pay a standard fee to everyone who has been involved in the research, based on local structures of value. Others have paid particular categories of participants – e.g. working children.

In another project the same researcher trained young people from the community to generate digitalised data, store, retrieve, present the findings to their communities. This had a great impact with their parents surprised and proud that their children could do such a thing. Local people were so pleased with the research project that a child born during the five years’ programme was named after it. The team also supported one of the local researchers to get a higher qualification in forestry. Of course this led to difficulties in the shape of demands from others. But the researcher was proud to hear the local people reflect:

‘Here is one research where when they go we are not left feeling wasted.’

Action to follow through on the findings of research can also be a way of giving something back. An example is talking to the young men staffing minibuses, getting them to remove the offensive, sexist slogans written on the walls of the bus that make women uncomfortable as they ride.

Validating knowledge

As an East African scholar pointed out, in philosophy 'knowledge is justified true belief' – but who verifies and validates? It is important that the communities are involved in this. Knowledge needs to be based on a truth that corresponds with people's reality; researchers need to be prepared to challenge truths that are not based on this. This means recognising that standards differ. For example, maps that are rich with people's histories are very different to Google maps. You need to accept maps that don't look like the ones you saw when you went to school!

Research must be believable. How is it packaged? Coming from north, how will the south – and particularly the communities themselves – believe in it?

5. How do practitioners view academic research?

While researchers often argue the importance of engaging with practice, the costs to practitioners of engaging with researchers are not always acknowledged. Two unusually frank and critical presentations from local NGOs emphasised these points.

There were some tensions within these. On the one hand, the NGOs were positioned as understanding the complexity of the contexts, while researchers were seen as interested only in their small, technical speciality. On the other, NGOs were said to want a straight answer, while researchers hedged around any recommendations with conditions.

One of the NGOs expressed frustration that they had data from their Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, which researchers would not use because it had not gone through a formal ethics procedure. The other said their main contact was with Masters or PhD students who weren't interested in their data, just using them to provide an introduction to 'the field'.

Experiences of applying for research funding had been bruising. One had been involved in multiple applications with no success, and was frustrated by the bureaucracy involved. Then the bids were assessed by a panel of scientists, who rejected them for a lack of purity in the science, unable to appreciate the multidimensional nature of poverty. The other had been involved with academics who might make 20 applications for funding, in the hope of being successful in one or two. They then have to fill in 20 sections on community engagement! It wouldn't be fair to pass this burden on to their partner organisations in the south. This perspective upends the dominant emphasis in this workshop as in others, that equity means southern partners should be fully involved from the earliest stage.

The message was clear: 'we don't have time for academics!' who take too long and are too disengaged from the context. Instead they were working with a major corporate on water and energy, that they saw as having the practical expertise that academics lack. The company sets the agenda according to its own interests, and creams off a considerable part of the funding as profit for itself. Its scale is much greater (£5 million over three years) and it wants answers FAST.

One threw out a challenge: NGOs have shifted their headquarters and operations to the South. How and when will universities do the same?

Policy advocates from East Africa were more positive about research, seeing it as important to the legitimacy of their case. Here too, however, there were criticisms, that research had been done where it was convenient, rather than where it was most needed; and researchers had not been sufficiently active in engaging at the local and regional levels to ensure their findings brought about some change.

There was also frustration at the cost of academic outputs, when a synthesis book from interdisciplinary research was published at £65 a copy. The people they would like to read it cannot afford that price. How was it that people aimed to create a common good out of their own commitment, and then found it transformed into a commercial asset?

6. What do we obscure by generalising about 'the global South'?

Contradictions and differences within countries were also the focus of discussion, showing the limitations of generalising across a nation-state, let alone the whole global South. As an East African participant put it:

'Global challenges are local challenges being addressed at the global level and then needing to come back to the local level.'

Contesting government policy

It can be difficult to do research against government policy. For example, if the policy is that girls should leave school if they get pregnant, and never return, then it is hard to do research on pregnant schoolgirls. Similarly, if a government views homosexuality as a private issue, it makes it hard to research it as a matter of human rights.

Popular conspiracy theories can also make certain topics difficult. For example, in some countries there is widespread suspicion of US foundations backing population policies, that they want to de-populate Africa. This makes research on contraceptive use very sensitive.

The language to be used as medium of instruction may also be a matter of controversy. What do you do if the official policy is to teach through English, while students don't know English well enough to learn the other subjects? In practice this means teachers use KiSwahili in class and produce notes in English which the children then learn off by heart for exams. Scientists, linguists and educationalists in Tanzania have joined in a major interdisciplinary collaboration to lobby for Ki-Swahili to be used as the medium of instruction and re-design school textbooks for readability.

On talking to children

A short exchange questioned the child rights orthodoxy that children themselves should be the primary informants in school based research. While one person (based in the north) stress the importance of asking children and communities what they need, another stressed that schools are very hierarchical: it goes against the grain to ask the children's views. An East African researcher confirmed it would cause trouble to go straight to the children. There was a need to spend time explaining things to the head teacher first, to allay any fears.

Elite capture of global research funding

Tigist's research also drew attention to the problem of a few universities in the global South hovering up the vast majority of global research funding.

'For reasons that we don't know the capturing of research partnership and funder attraction is very predictable. It is managed by a few people on top and sits in specific departments time and time again. The reality may be that the most suited department to explore the research problem is actually not considered.' (*Male, senior academic*)

A colleague from East Africa confirmed that this was blighting her own university. 'The new universities like ours are not visible.' They have the will and the vision to shift from being primarily a training institute to a research university, but they are simply off the radar of international actors. Despite having attracted some significant academics by their research focus and location in the capital city, the funders' requirement of a good track record remains a significant barrier.