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Making New Friends: How Critical Autoethnography Helps Us Fight Dominant Research Methodologies

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Abstract

As educational researchers with a focus on social justice and teacher education, we often have to cope with commonly held views on what constitutes “good” research. For example, people expect us to remain objective and to avoid addressing political issues with our research. In our search for possible research methodologies that might be suitable for our research, we found a powerful friend in forms of critical autoethnography. In this paper, I’d like to share some considerations and reflections stemming from our own research practices where we have been informed and inspired by forms of critical autoethnography.

Keywords

Methodological reflections; socially just education research; fighting dominant research methodologies; friendship; inspiration

It had been a while since we had spoken, but that evening in early October 2023 my friend called, furious, frustrated and upset. It was a few days after Hamas had carried out attacks on Israelis. My friend was in fear of what these attacks would mean for Palestinians in Gaza; she was concerned about the fate of those who had been taken hostage; she was angry both at Hamas and at the West’s uncritical support for Israel. And she was frustrated, because the Monday after that violent weekend, she had had to account for her Islamic background at her school: in the teachers’ room, she was bluntly asked how she felt about Hamas....

With this briefly described experience, my colleague Zena Bani and I began a paper for educators in which we wanted to address the fear of Islam in education (Bani & Leijgraaf, submitted). Just like in the United States and other Western European countries, Muslims and people who ‘look like’ Muslims (meaning: people who are mistaken for Muslims) are confronted with fear of the Islam in the Netherlands. Especially after 9/11, Muslims are seen as an existential danger to Western societies: can we still trust Islamic fellow citizens in the West? And isn’t it about time Muslims explicitly distance themselves from terror (El Hamidi, 2022)? Since these forms of Islamophobia are also – mostly unnoticed and unconscious – intruding into our Dutch schools, we decided to write a paper on this topic in which we would also explore the Orientalist roots of Islamophobia (Said, 2003). For us, this paper was the start of a much larger research project on Islamophobia in Dutch (teacher) education.

Our initial idea was to submit the paper to a professional journal focusing on elementary education, special education and teacher education for which I had written before. Having pitched our idea, we received a reluctant response: the journal considered Islamophobia always, but especially now a “loaded” topic. So we decided to turn to a pedagogical journal. Despite some hesitation in response to our pitch (“Don’t you write too much from the role of victim?”), we did get invited to submit our article. Unfortunately, the

article was rejected because, in the opinion of the editors, it was not about pedagogy. Moreover, they felt it was too political and polarizing.

The reason I dwell at such length on this example is that it illustrates issues that we encounter as educational research group with a focus on social justice (teacher) education that wants to fight structures of inequality in (teacher) education. The small research group that Zena and I are part of often has to cope with commonly held views on what constitutes “good” research: people expect us to aim for theories (“Don’t tell stories!”), to keep our distance during the research process (“Don’t get too involved!”), to remain as objective as possible in representing our research (“Don’t use ‘I’ or ‘we’ but choose a more detached third person as the narrative voice in your paper!”), and – as this example illustrates – to avoid addressing political issues. Although in our context, qualitative research is fortunately highly valued, we are regularly confronted with dominant views like these that have grown from positivist and colonial conceptions of (good) research (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

In our search for possible research methodologies that might be suitable for our research, our research group found a powerful friend in forms of critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). In this paper, I’d like to share some considerations and reflections stemming from our own research practices where we have been informed and inspired by forms of critical autoethnography (hereafter referred to as CAE). This paper was written in dialogue with my colleagues in our research group: together we discussed how their research and their personal involvement in it are addressed in this paper.

In a similar way, I shared these comparisons and reflections in an international conference for educational researchers (Leijgraaf, 2024). By doing so, I hope to contribute to building bridges between CAE and educational research (Anteliz et al., 2023)

#1. CAE helps us better unravel our research aim

As mentioned before, as a social justice-oriented education research group, we want to fight structures of inequality in (teacher) education because of the impact they have on people, especially on people from marginalized groups. Therefore, much of our research involves exploring ways in which individuals (in the context of [teacher] education) respond to and cope with structures of inequality in society and in the educational system in which they find themselves. What coping strategies do people employ when dealing with unequal power relations in (teacher) education arising from factors such as religion, gender, race, language, citizenship status, cultural capital, (dis)ability, age, class, socioeconomic status, and/ or an intersection of factors like these? Explicitly, we also include our own experiences of privilege and disadvantage in our research.

From the perspective of CAE, our research aim can be seen as a critical connection between the ‘-ethno’ (namely the structures of inequality in education) and the ‘auto-’ (namely the experiences of both ourselves and students, novice teachers, teachers, teacher educators, parents and others involved in education). This insight, for instance, was very helpful to my previously mentioned colleague Zena, who was pretty determined on her research topic: Islamophobia in (teacher) education. Being a Muslim and a teacher educator, elementary school teacher and former novice teacher herself, she is unfortunately pretty familiar with this topic. With her research, she wants to create a stage for Islamophobic experiences of (novice) teachers and to fight the Western dominant idea that equates Muslims with terrorists. But she wasn’t sure about how to do that with research. CAE made her decide to start by writing down her own personal experiences as a Muslim in the Dutch education system; to invite (novice) teachers to tell their own stories and experiences on this topic (the ‘auto-’); and to bring these stories in critical connection with theories, existing research and popular cultural artifacts that reflect the topic of Islamophobia (the ‘-ethno’).

Like the other members of our research group, Zena wants her research to contribute to disrupting structures of inequality in society in general and in (teacher) education in particular. The adjective ‘critical’ in CAE supports us in our strive to “amplify previously silenced and marginalized experiences” and to use our research “as a mechanism for change” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021, p. 3). The activism inherent in CAE supported us to resubmit our paper on Islamophobia, but this time to a more activist opinion magazine that practices journalism for a just and sustainable world.

#2. CAE supports us in demonstrating insider knowledge and limitations within existing research

Besides helping us better unravel our research aim, CAE also supports us in demonstrating insider knowledge and limitations within existing research. Lisanne Plutschouw, another colleague and member of our research group, has a lot of insider knowledge of her research topic: multilingualism. Her work as a researcher and teacher educator focuses on multilingualism. But besides that, she is the partner of an Iraqi Arabic-speaking man with whom she raises their children multilingually. So Lisanne can offer unique, firsthand insights into negative stereotypes about Arabic languages which dominate Dutch (and Western) culture and society that are not adequately represented in existing research. Like most other non-Western and Eastern European languages, Arabic is considered a subtractive second language in the Netherlands. Indeed, it has a lower status in Dutch society than Western second languages such as English and French. Signs like the one shown in Lisanne’s photo below (which indicates that only Dutch may be spoken at school and in the schoolyard) therefore target not so much potential native English speakers, but children and parents who speak Turkish or an Arabic language at home.



At the same time, Lisanne can also offer unique, firsthand insights into people’s fight against these negative stereotypes, as you can see in this picture that shows their eldest son’s sneakers with his name on them not only in Dutch but also in Arabic.



By valuing the demonstration of insider knowledge, CAE gives Lisanne the opportunity and freedom to include her own unique experiences in her research project and to invite her students (who participate in her research project) to include and value their own experiences of multilingualism as well. Doing so, she fills important gaps in existing research.

#3. CAE enables us to take seriously our own funds of knowledge and identity

Thirdly, CAE enables us to take seriously and mobilize our own funds of knowledge and identity. The term ‘funds of knowledge’ is derived from the work of Luis C. Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff and Norma Gonzalez who worked together in a collaborative project between anthropology and education. The project aimed to build bridges between household and classroom practices within working-class, Mexican communities in Arizona; knowledge and skills that are not valued or included in existing curricula. They developed new forms of teaching that draw upon the knowledge and skills found in the students’ local households. Their idea is “that by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 132). Because the knowledge and skills students acquire outside of school not only come from their families and communities but also from peer groups and popular culture, the term ‘funds of knowledge’ was broadened to ‘funds of knowledge and identity’ (Volman & ‘t Gilde, 2020). Valuing the knowledge, skills and experiences students gain at home, within their communities and peer groups and on the so-called social media (knowledge, skills and experiences that are hardly appreciated in [teacher] education) is an essential aspect of our social justice focused (teacher) education (Leijgraaf, 2022), because “it fundamentally rejects reliance on negative assumptions and stereotypes that characterize deficit theorizing” (Hogg & Volman, 2020, p. 864).

Although we were keen to value and include students’ funds of knowledge and identity in our teacher education practices, CAE made us realize that in our own research practices we tended to exclude our own funds of knowledge and identity because of dominant methodological views. I’d like to illustrate this by a reflective conversation we had as researchers within the PhD research of another member of our research group, named Nina Hosseini.

Dominant views on methodology teach us to make rational choices and decisions during our research process, increasing the feasibility for other researchers to replicate the study. During a reflective conversation we had about Nina’s research, we realized the extent to which our thinking was subconsciously influenced by this dominant methodological narrative. We were discussing how our existing knowledge (books we had read, documentaries we had seen), issues that mattered to us (such as Nina’s housing activism) and people we knew (like Zena’s friend Esther Kamara who became a crucial co-researcher) had significantly influenced the research process. Initially, we tended to negatively label this as ‘coincidences’ that weakened the study. But CAE made us realize that we could also interpret this as the ‘auto-’ being at work in our choices and decisions as researchers: we were able to design certain research activities because of the books we had read, documentaries we had seen, the activist life we lived and the friendships we valued. Thanks to CAE, we positively relabeled our choices and decisions during the research process as mobilizing our own funds of knowledge and identity.



Image: The books we had read, documentaries we had seen, the activist life we lived and the friendships we valued.

#4. CAE inspires and supports us to value stories and storytelling

“Great stories! But how are you going to make academic papers out of this?!” This response from the people to whom Nina and I presented our research reflects the dominant methodological narrative that research is supposed to lead to generalizable statements and theories rather than stories. In our collective effort to disrupt the master narrative with our teacher education and research (Leijgraaf, 2022) and to create and work with counternarratives, we already found much inspiration and support from Critical Race Theory that sees (counter-)storytelling as an important tool to challenge master narratives and strengthen traditions of resistance (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016; Leijgraaf, 2024). Besides Critical Race Theory, CAE also gave us a lot of support and inspiration to make storytelling the heart of our research.

The value CAE places on storytelling felt truly liberating to our co-researcher and teacher Fatima El Khattabi, who is passionately committed to gifted children and their parents in Amsterdam Nieuw-West, a neighborhood populated mainly by people from marginalized groups whose families have a history of migration from non-Western countries. Long before our research group was launched, she began her storytelling project in which she collected stories told by gifted children and their parents in this neighborhood. Also personally, she had experienced that society assumes that gifted children only live in affluent neighborhoods and not in deprived neighborhoods like Amsterdam Nieuw-West. As a result of this prejudice, gifted children in Amsterdam Nieuw-West are easily labeled with for instance ADHD, and even put on medication, while the real problem is not properly acknowledged: these children are not adequately challenged. She was thrilled to learn of CAE, a research methodology that not only values storytelling but cannot do without it. Now that she has conducted a theoretical study of the interaction between teachers and their gifted students for her master’s thesis, we are considering, following Shelly Carter’s (2002) lead, to write a paper connecting Fatima’s theoretical findings with the stories she has been collecting all these years.

#5. CAE reflects our rejection of objectivity and our desire to center our positionalities and commitments as researchers

It must have been a very strange experience for the now graduated novice teacher from our group, Ben McKay, to run into words like ‘Eskimo’ in Dutch society and education. The opening words of his undergraduate thesis read:

“Twenty-three years ago, I emigrated to the Netherlands as a Canadian. Never was the difference between my country of birth and my new home greater than when, in 1999, I saw a museum announce their new exhibition with a large banner bearing the word ‘Eskimos’. Many years earlier, in Canada, I had learned that the term ‘Eskimo’ was outdated and perhaps even racist. How could it still be in use here in the

Netherlands? I was equally perplexed when I came across the term ‘Indians’ in a textbook [at the elementary school where he worked]... Had we not long since moved away from such erroneous terms?”

In his thesis, Ben explicitly embraces his positionality as a (novice) teacher in the Netherlands with Canadian roots. This positionality helps him unmask terms like ‘Eskimo’ and ‘Indian’ in Dutch textbooks as colonial, and include indigenous voices in both his research and Dutch teaching practices. Although Ben’s undergraduate thesis does not pretend to be a CAE project, it is fair to say that the break with objectivity and embrace of positionality advocated by CAE has given him the freedom to make his own Canadian-Dutch experiences part of his research project.

Extra examples of the friendship we experienced from CAE, with many thanks!

Because of time, in my presentation I only briefly showed the other examples of the friendship we researchers experienced from CAE. And I will do the same here, unfortunately without the sound of Miles Davis...

Before briefly discussing the other examples, I would like to thank my colleagues very much. They have all agreed to be mentioned with their own names in this article. And many thanks to Tony Adams who taught me so much about autoethnographic research.

Extra examples of the friendship we experience from CAE

- #6 CAE supports us in our efforts to avoid using other people’s experiences for our own benefit (the so-called danger of mining);
- #7 CAE supports our commitment to including other people’s voices in a socially just and ethical way, and avoiding othering the people that participate in our research;
- #8 CAE’s rich and vivid tradition of asking and discussing ethical questions challenges and stimulates our own ethical reflections;
- #9 CAE enables us to include unexpected moments, conversations and experiences we could never prepare for with a formal research protocol;
- #10 CAE is known for its creative, evocative and accessible forms of representation, which inspired us, for example, to present our research in the form of a performance, pictured below.



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