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“It’s a case of access.” The problematics of accessing research participants

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ABSTRACT

The problematics of accessing research participants have been largely under-stated in the education research literature. This article discusses two case studies which illustrate the complexity of the process of access. This is complexity beyond ethical consent; it is the complexity of gaining access to research sites and participants and of ongoing negotiation concerning aspects of access, especially when the stakes are high for participants. In this article we first set out what is already known in the literature about challenges and strategies of access. Next, we evaluate our own experiences of access with others. Our analysis reveals key findings: a) the relevance of insider/outsider status; b) the need to engage in repeated negotiations to obtain the agreement and consent of gatekeepers; c) the value of identifying kaiārahi (guides) and building relationships; d) the importance of understanding organisational culture, power dynamics of relationships and of knowledge production; and e) the significance of operating in a transparent manner around researcher identity and the nature of the specific study. A research plan may be approved as ethical but may not prove to be practical when the researcher tries to enact it, thus necessitating modification. The challenge becomes finding a practice that is ethical for a particular group and context. Lastly, we propose that education researchers who have negotiated the power dynamics to build relationships among kaiārahi, gatekeepers and participants need to communicate their knowledge and experiences of accessing research participants with other researchers.

Keywords

Access; gatekeepers; kaiārahi; education; prison education; insider/outsider

Introduction

The challenge faced by researchers of accessing research sites and participants is not a new issue. Broadhead and Rist (1976) discussed this subject more than 40 years ago, explaining that challenges frequently include arduous negotiations, not only to gain initial access to the research sites and participants, but also to maintain access throughout the data collection process. The process of



accessing the research site and participants is paramount to the successful achievement of educational research outcomes, yet may be less under a researcher's control. More recently, over the past 15 years, researchers have carefully considered and analysed encounters related to accessing a research site and participants (Cheah & Parker, 2014; Clark, 2010; Corra & Willer, 2002; Emmel, Hughes, Greenhalgh, & Sales, 2007; Horwood & Moon, 2003; Hoyland, Hollund, & Olsen, 2015; Lund, Panda, & Dhal, 2016; Reeves, 2010; Roguski & Tauri, 2013). In this body of research, the relationships and power dynamics between the researcher and the researched comes to the fore, demanding careful consideration. A crucial component of successful access is for the researcher to make contact and build and sustain a relationship with key individuals inside the desired location of research. Throughout the literature, these people are referred to as 'gatekeepers'.

In this article we discuss the significance of gatekeepers and introduce an additional term, 'kaiārahi' (*guides*). Gatekeepers and guides are people who can help or hinder a researcher's access to research sites and to participants depending on how they view their validity and value. A researcher's access can closely depend on the power dynamics of a gatekeeper or guide's relationship with the researcher and research participants and their status or influence in their specific context. According to some researchers, the responsibility over the research design, representation and outcomes lies more with the researcher and less with their participants (Brun & Lund, 2010; Emmel et al., 2007; Lund et al., 2016). Lund et al. (2016) recently found that participant vulnerabilities may exist even during collaborative research projects, as once "accessed" by the researcher, research participants may possess little control over the knowledge production and dissemination. Yet one key part of the research process that may be less under a researcher's control is to gain access to research sites and to participants.

Access to the research locations and cooperation with participants were achieved in two doctoral research studies that are underway by two of the authors of this article. The third author of this article is responsible for supervising both of the research projects discussed here. Two case studies are presented to illustrate efforts to negotiate and collaborate with gatekeepers and a kaiārahi. We compare these experiences around issues of access with those reported in the literature and discuss our challenges to find a practice that effectively facilitates researcher access. The research locations of the first case comprised of four tertiary education sites in Aotearoa New Zealand, where participants were largely tertiary level first-year students. The research location of the second case comprised of five prison sites in Tanzania, where the majority of participants were adult prisoners engaging in education programmes.

Challenges of access

Challenges facing researchers in gaining access to research sites have been reported: a) limiting conditions of entry, access to data and respondents; restricting the scope of analysis; retaining prerogatives about publication (Broadhead & Rist, 1976); b) managers placing high value on their time; organisation outsiders are not welcomed, especially if asking sensitive or awkward questions; organisation scepticism of academic research; and the need for a researcher to have highly developed social and negotiation skills (Johl & Renganathan, 2010); c) gender discrimination issues; skills of developing rapport as a mechanism for control (Reeves, 2010); d) researcher's ability to offer benefits; demonstrating researcher suitability; gaining approval from "third parties" (Shenton & Hayter, 2004); e) differences between access and cooperation; and tactics to resist cooperation (Wanat, 2008).

The problem of access to research sites seems to be common for not only academic research staff but also for masters and doctoral research students (Hoyland et al., 2015). This is also the case for international students from developing countries undertaking their studies in developed countries, when they embark on their fieldwork back in their country of origin (Broadhead & Rist, 1976). One may assume it is easy for them to gain access since they are the citizens of those particular countries and have an *insider's* advantage (Greene, 2014; Sikes, 2006). However, that is not always the case. The challenge deepens "when it comes to gaining access to secretive sites or 'elite' informants, since

issues of power dynamics and differentials come to the fore. One practical difficulty is that individuals in positions of relative power may be more likely to refuse to participate in research studies" (Monahan & Fisher, 2015, p. 711).

Challenges of access are not insurmountable but may require researchers to go to great lengths. Broadhead and Rist (1976) note that strategies of covert entry, invasion of privacy, disguise and false representation are not only impolite (and officially prohibited), but are also a breach of professionalism and ethics. However, it is not inconceivable that those strategies have been employed by some researchers. By contrast, other scholars have reported more helpful strategies they used to deal with challenges of access. Kawulich (2011) discussed gaining access by establishing trusting, long-term relationships through social networking, acquiring specific permissions at various levels, presenting oneself appropriately and showing respect for cultural mores. McAreavey and Das (2013) add that some researchers adopt strategies of negotiating deals with gatekeepers to ensure the inclusion of minority or marginalised groups, as well as making personal disclosures. Siwale's (2015) main strategies were navigating the politics of 'field identity', understanding insider/outsider positionality, and knowledge of organisational politics and local context in terms of power relationships. Wanat (2008) discusses the effects of empathetic and negative relationships, public relations, researcher accountability and concludes that "cooperation is best gained by understanding social power, having open lines of communication and knowing when yes means no" (p. 205). Lastly, Monahan and Fisher (2015) came up with several strategies for obtaining access to secretive/guarded organisations or *total institutions* including, but not limited to, finding the names and making cold calls, communicating legitimacy, reducing the perception of threat, coordinating coincidence and making unannounced visits, mobilising indirect access, triangulating internet data, and initiating and following-up on multiple leads simultaneously.

Gatekeepers and kaiārahi

The literature on qualitative research insists on the importance of qualitative researchers maintaining ethical considerations throughout the research process; one of the important aspects is gaining access permission from authorities for and throughout the data collection process (Johl & Renganathan, 2010; Monahan & Fisher, 2015; Shenton & Hayter, 2004). In order to access research sites smoothly, researchers are expected to build rapport and convince authorities of a particular organisation to allow them to carry out their studies. Clark (2010) views *gatekeepers* as the "individuals, groups, and organizations that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants" (Clark, 2010, p. 486), noting they are often not part of study participants, but play a very significant role in either helping or hindering the research process. Lund et al. (2016) explain, "a gatekeeper is generally understood to be someone who has the power and control over access to communities and key respondents in a particular location selected for research" (p. 281). Therefore gatekeepers have an 'invisible hand' in the production of knowledge by influencing whose knowledge can be accessed. Reeves (2010) categorised gatekeepers as formal and informal. While formal gatekeepers are those with formal authority to allow a researcher access, informal gatekeepers have no formal power to allow or restrict the process, but they can influence the accomplishment or failure of the project. For instance, if a researcher intends to interview students at a particular school, class teachers will not be formal gatekeepers as the formal permission would be granted by school leaders (Board of Trustees, Governors or Principal). However, class teachers can influence access to those students; hence, they become informal gatekeepers.

Adopting an Indigenous Māori worldview, the concept of a gatekeeper may be considered in a different way. One meaning of '*kaiārahi*' is as a term that describes someone who leads others in *karakia* (prayer) or *waiata* (song), since they determine the pace and speed in which it is learned or performed (Kawana, 2015). Kaiārahi can also mean leading by example towards a shared goal or destination and conveys a sense of someone who guides, mentors or escorts others (Moorfield, 2011). In this article the term kaiārahi is adopted to recognise a person who provides a pathway to knowledge

by guiding, mentoring and working alongside a researcher to enable research to happen within their organisation. We argue that the significant power over the research process that a kaiārahi possesses requires careful consideration. There are similarities and differences between the gatekeeper's and the kaiārahi's role. Similarities lie around the power over the research process that either a gatekeeper or kaiārahi has in terms of facilitating (or hindering) access to research sites and participants. Kaiārahi are like gatekeepers in that they act as intermediaries between researchers and participants, play a significant role in the research process, and have power and control over access to communities and key respondents in a particular location selected for research. However, kaiārahi may differ from gatekeepers in that they tend to play a more participatory role and take on a more visible partnership role with the researcher within the organisation.

The relationship of power between researchers, gatekeepers and kaiārahi usually needs to be negotiated collaboratively in order to contribute to creating inclusive research spaces. Even when research permission is granted, gatekeepers and guides may still influence “the timespan, depth, and scope of the investigation” (Broadhead & Rist, 1976, p. 329). Foucault (1975) referred to power as flowing throughout society through those who make policy, implement policy and are recipients of policy (stakeholders). These ‘capillaries of power’ are pervasive and concealed, reaching into each individual, leading people to govern themselves through regulation of their own behaviour. Negotiating effective personal and power relations between researchers, participants, kaiārahi and gatekeepers is pivotal in order for joint knowledge producers to create meaningful research. It is noteworthy, in the Māori language, *ako* conveys a meaningful two-way teaching and learning relationship, where the teacher and student both learn from each other in a power-sharing relationship. *Ako* is grounded in the principle of reciprocity (Ministry of Education, 2013) and requires two-way, open communication for effective learning to occur.

Lund et al. (2016) and Nagar (2014) suggest that communication must be facilitated among researchers, gatekeepers and community members in order for co-production of knowledge to occur. This requires negotiating and creating a ‘boundary space’. Gaining access to research sites and participants requires two-way, open communication between researchers and gatekeeper or kaiārahi, who need to negotiate this ‘boundary space’ collaboratively. Creating boundary spaces together necessitates defining the terms of engagement between researcher, gatekeeper and participants as well as inclusion and exclusion among research participants. Boundary spaces promote an environment conducive for joint reflection towards a common understanding of a situation or phenomenon. According to Beebejaun, Durose, Rees, Richardson, and Richardson (2014), negotiating this boundary space to co-produce research may require reconceptualisation of the role of the researcher and involve going beyond typical methods. For example, using storytelling, photography and performance may make different ways of thinking visible. Another example for researchers working in diverse cultural spaces involving going beyond typical methods is to re-conceptualise the role of a gatekeeper as a kaiārahi to engage in creating a boundary space and terms of access.

Data sources and analysis processes

The primary aim of this qualitative study was to investigate how access was gained to four tertiary education institutions and five prisons (a total of nine research sites). A secondary aim was to use field and reflective notes to determine specifically what strategies to gain and sustain access were effective and ineffective. The method involved three steps: first, the process of gaining access to nine research sites (and participants) was documented and compiled into nine accounts of access. Second, each account was individually examined and analysed (in conjunction with existing literature) for access strategies that were deemed effective and ineffective. Third, an overall summary analysis across the nine sites was drawn together for emergent themes.

In the first step, documentation of access was made by both doctoral researchers, consisting of field and reflective notes, letters, emails, notes of phone calls and in-person visits. Each doctoral researcher compiled records of the process of gaining and sustaining access to their own case study research sites

and participants to create an account of access for each research site. The second step entailed each account of access being examined for ways in which the data contributed to the overall picture of what was going on. Specifically, we examined our accounts to compare ideas on what techniques of negotiation we employed and whether they had helped or hindered our access. Following this, we compared our accounts and ideas to those in the literature, examining the extent of agreement on the associations between our accounts and existing accounts in the literature of the issues surrounding access. Finally, in the third step, we compared all our accounts noting similarities, differences and emerging themes. Differences arose depending on the personnel we encountered, necessitating what we had done to manoeuvre around or collaborate with gatekeepers and *kaiārahi*. An overall summary analysis across all nine research sites was drawn together. This summary analysis informs the problematics of accessing research participants presented in this article.

Our case studies

In order to avoid harm and protect anonymity for study participants and institutions involved in the following two case studies, we have not used real names and have limited identifying descriptors as much as possible. We acknowledge a possible consequent lack of immediacy of data in doing so.

Case Study 1: Gaining access in tertiary institutions

The first case of access originates from a qualitative study currently being conducted by a New Zealand European female doctoral student researcher (Diana) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her doctoral project involves four tertiary education institutions: a university, a polytechnic, an institute of technology and a *wānanga*ⁱ. This is a collaborative project with indigenous Māori tertiary students participating in focus groups, repeated semi-structured interviews, conversations and e-mail correspondence. The research explores what effective transitions into tertiary education look like for Māori students.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori are the indigenous people. Revolutionary changes to New Zealand's education system occurred in 1982 in response to what Smith (2000) refers to as "dual crises of educational underachievement [of Māori] on the one hand and the loss of language, knowledge and culture on the other" (p. 57). Despite these changes, many researchers consider that Māori students in the education system are still marginalised; thus, by definition, their views are largely absent in policy and decision making (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009; Gaventia & Cornwall, 2008). The voice of marginalised populations, such as Māori students, is rarely published in tertiary education literature (Airini et al., 2010; Airini et al., 2011; Chauvel & Rean, 2012; Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Hohapata, 2011; McKinley & Madjar, 2014). This study will add to that voice by listening closely to the participants' lived experiences. The participatory research method employed in this study placed a responsibility on Diana to work collaboratively with Māori individuals and communities to ensure that the research outcomes produced positive benefits for Māori (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Access and ethical consent were sought through the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the faculty of study and with local *iwi* (tribes), and at four different tertiary education institutions. Consent from staff and students in a wide range of programmes was also required.

Common practice in gaining access to research sites (Aotearoa New Zealand context)

ⁱ A *wānanga* is a tertiary education institution unique to Aotearoa New Zealand. Contemporary *wānanga*, although conceptually framed in a western tradition of tertiary education delivery, qualification structures, funding measures and so on, reflect Māori knowledge and traditions and are guided by Māori principles and values.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, all students and staff seeking to do research with human subjects through a university, a polytechnic, an institute of technology and a wānanga must first get their intended research project approved by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at their institution. It is common practice for HRECs to require information from the researcher about how they will recruit participants for their study and to approve consent letters that a researcher intends to provide to participants. Once the ethics application is approved, the researcher (student or staff) is then permitted to commence their research and data collection. However, receiving ethics consent does not necessarily guarantee access to the research site and participants. Faced with these dilemmas in the field, researchers improvise to overcome challenges of access by working hard at negotiating, re-negotiating, investigating who might be the kaiārahi to escort the researcher along the pathway of meeting participants and representing their knowledge, and building relationships to grow confidence and understanding, all of which rely on researcher inter-personal skills.

All of these activities take a considerable amount of time and resources. They are, in fact, a necessary *process* which can be messy, exhausting, all-consuming and even risky. Sometimes access is unable to be gained, necessitating a change in direction of the initially intended research. The misconnections between the processes of gaining access as submitted during ethics application processes with what occurs in practice is largely ignored by the literature, yet are commonly faced by research practitioners (Corra & Willer, 2002; Hoyland et al., 2015; Reeves, 2010). As a consequence, education researchers who negotiate the power relationship with kaiārahi, gatekeepers and participants need to communicate their experiences about the process of access with other researchers.

Co-existing as insider and outsider

At the time of embarking on participant recruitment, Diana was employed at one of the tertiary education institutions included in the study. Professional relationships existed with key staff members and numerous students in three of the four participating tertiary education institutions. In these three cases, Diana might be considered an *insider* (Greene, 2014; Sikes, 2006) as she was a work colleague with pre-existing relationships with the people whom she planned to approach to participate in the study. First, Diana gained ethics approval for the study from the University of Waikato, where she is enrolled as a doctoral student (*insider* status). Next, she gained ethics approval with the tertiary institution of her employment (*insider* status). She also gained ethical approval from the third institution which has a partnership arrangement with the tertiary institution of her employment (*partial insider* status). It might be interpreted that ethics approval being granted by an institution became synonymous with ‘access’ in the views of institutional staff, most likely because of Diana’s *insider* status. The challenge arose for Diana when seeking ethics approval (which was assumed as synonymous for ‘access’) from the fourth institution, the wānanga. In this case, Diana could be considered an *outsider*, as she had no existing personal/professional relationship with any staff or students; she was not employed there; she was not an enrolled student. Furthermore, Diana identifies as a Pākehā New Zealander and was seeking to research with Māori participants enrolled in a kaupapa Māoriⁱⁱ organisation. This is a high stakes situation, owing to the general legacy of Pākehā research ‘on’ Māori marked by a history of domination, oppression and marginalisation (Pihama, Smith, Taki, & Lee, 2004; Rameka, 2012; Smith, 2012, 2005). Thus, Diana understood that *kia tūpato* (proceeding with care) was extremely important in order to grow a respectful partnership between herself as a researcher and the wānanga staff and students as research participants.

ⁱⁱ A kaupapa Māori organisation is underpinned by a philosophical approach of incorporating the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of Māori society. Many kaupapa Māori organisations focus on retrieving space for Māori voices to be heard, and thus operate using customs that express Māori ways of knowing and being in society. Māori Dictionary. (2017). *Kaupapa Māori* Retrieved from <http://maoridictionary.co.nz/kaupapa+maori>
Rameka, L. (2012). *Te Whatu Kakahu: Assessment in kaupapa Māori early childhood practice*. University of Waikato, Hamilton. Rangahau. (n.d). *Principles of Kaupapa Māori*. Retrieved from <http://www.rangahau.co.nz/research-idea/27>

Outsider site access experience at the wānanga: Diana

Diana first needed to gain formal ethics consent from the wānanga in order to access and subsequently invite students to participate in her research. Initial attempts to access the research site and participants through a formal gatekeeper met with tactics to resist cooperation (Wanat, 2008) and limited conditions of entry (Broadhead & Rist, 1976). Diana realised that, in this case, gaining access may involve her going beyond typical methods. She had to find a key person who would be willing to provide a pathway into developing a partnership with the research participants at the wānanga—a kaiārahi. Despite external pressures of study commitment deadlines, this process was going to take time and care; rushing it could potentially ruin relationships and jeopardise the research project. Diana was mindful that knowledge is viewed as a *taonga* (gift, treasure) in a Māori worldview (Macnaught, 2016). Accordingly, she had to earn her kaiārahi's confidence that she could be entrusted with the gift of the research participants' knowledge and that she would honour this gift throughout the knowledge production and representation.

Diana began communications with a range of wānanga staff through multiple e-mails, in-person visits, phone calls and texts. After approximately two months, another colleague at her workplace introduced Diana to a key staff member at the wānanga. This staff member not only held a high level of *mana* (prestige, influence) but also very quickly saw value and understood Diana's proposed research project. After further emails, texts and in-person discussions, this person guided Diana through appropriate channels, which culminated in her receiving the required ethics consent from the wānanga and permission to invite students to participate in her research. Upon reflection, Diana realised that during this process, a mutually respectful understanding had developed with this person, who, in fact, had come to be her kaiārahi. Furthermore, many of the wānanga staff now knew Diana and her research project. By the end of the process, when she received the Ethics Consent via e-mail, she gained the sense that her status had moved from being less of an *outsider* to more of a *partial insider* (Greene, 2014).

Greene (2014) wrote about the concept of *insider* and *outsider* in research, associating being an insider/outsider with a researcher's position in relation to study participants and to the institutions under study. She cautioned that *outsider researchers* always face difficulties in gaining *access* as they "may not have contacts within the social group and possess less knowledge of how *membership* is attained" (p. 4) and, therefore, they may not be accepted. The researcher-kaiārahi relationship had to be negotiated collaboratively to create an inclusive research space, a 'boundary space'. The kaiārahi now placed trust in the researcher to respectfully honour the *taonga* (gift) of the participants' knowledge; and the researcher now placed trust into the kaiārahi's 'invisible hand' to influence access to meaningful knowledge. The process of building a mutually respectful relationship with the kaiārahi, although time-consuming, was vital for the success of the research project. The kaiārahi's role was key to the primary research aim of conducting collaborative, respectful and meaningful research with the wānanga staff and student communities, raising the possibility that the research outcomes produce positive benefits for Māori.

Case Study 2: Gaining access into prisons

The second case of access is based on a project being conducted by a Tanzanian doctoral research student (Mohamed) which focuses on prison education in a Tanzanian context. This qualitative study employed multiple case studies, where five Tanzanian prisons were visited. Study participants included some prisoners who partook in educational programmes and some prisoners who did not, and teachers of the programmes (prison staff and prisoners). Others in this study include prison education coordinators, prison staff members, ex-prisoners, an Adult Education Officer, Institute of Adult Education staff members, a senior prison staff member (retired) and an NGO representative who

works with inmates. The data were collected through individual interviews, group interviews, observations and documentary analysis.

Common practice in gaining access to research sites (Tanzanian context)

The majority of Tanzanian educational institutions do not have HRECs, where researchers and research students must seek ethical approval prior to data collection, even when studies include human participants. Thus, it is common for social sciences researchers' proposals to not be required to pass through a HREC. Usually, when the educational institutional panel—in most cases University Senates—approves a student's proposal, or when a researcher/academic staff member is ready for data collection, the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic, Vice Chancellor, or Director of Postgraduate Studies (this depends on the individual institution ways of doing things) provides a research permit in the form of an introductory letter. It is this introductory letter that investigators take with them and submit to research sites' gatekeepers when they request access to individual institutions and individual participants. Therefore the majority of Tanzanian gatekeepers are used to this system. They put their trust in the institutions (universities) that introduce researchers/research students. The approach is different from New Zealand where researchers apply for research ethical approval from the appropriate research ethics committee before approaching the site or the participantsⁱⁱⁱ. Operating within New Zealand's procedures, Mohamed had to get ethics approval by writing and signing his *own* introductory letters and consent forms, which he took with him to the research sites approved by the university's Faculty of Education Research Committee. In this regard, it was the introductory letter written by Mohamed himself that introduced the researcher to the gatekeepers, as opposed to an institutional letter as practised in Tanzania. Mohamed is a Tanzanian national who had considerable experience as a Tanzanian student and an academic staff member in Tanzanian universities prior to commencing this PhD study. Mohamed knew the above common practices and politics in how to gain access to research sites in Tanzania. Therefore, in addition to having New Zealand-based ethics approval, Mohamed asked his doctoral supervisor to write him an introductory letter on institutional letterhead to operate in a way that Tanzanian officials would expect and understand.

Total institutions

Prisons commonly have the culture of isolating themselves from the rest of the world. They are highly restricted areas and operate with structured daily routines for prisoners—strict time to wake-up, time to eat, time to lock-up, timely security checks, etc. These types of prison routines are common across the world. With these characteristics, Goffman (1962) notes prisons as examples of *total institutions*. Staff members of a total institution (in this case, prison staff) are always few in number and have contact with both the inside and outside world; they usually feel superior and righteous (Goffman, 1962). Inmates of a total institution (in this case, prisoners) are always many in number and have restricted contact with the outside world; they usually feel inferior, weak and vulnerable. Being an inmate in a total institution undermines prisoners' dignity and has the effect of marginalising them. Consequently, total institutions negatively impact upon prisoners' sense of being and individuality which often affects their confidence and self-esteem. For an outsider, it is extremely difficult to access information in these *total institutions*—especially information regarding, and from, inmates (Goffman, 1962; Scott, 2010).

Considering the politics of access as explained above and that Mohamed's study was to be conducted in *total institutions* (prisons), Mohamed had to thoroughly plan his approach prior to his site visit. Research in prison settings may be perceived as high stakes situations for prison participants to reveal inside prison activities without jeopardising their wellbeing or self-esteem (Institute of Medicine, 2007). Therefore, as a researcher, Mohamed had to find a way to minimise risks and maximise

ⁱⁱⁱ See case study one for detailed information.

benefits for prison participants. Yet he could not be guaranteed access to prison documents because the Tanzanian prison system^{iv} is not always open to allowing access to prisoners. Therefore he had to find his own way in. Similar to Diana, mobilising indirect access (Monahan & Fisher, 2015) played a significant role in Mohamed's study as he eventually interviewed the retired senior officer to access views that could be assumed to be similar to those of the senior officers in the Department that he was unable to gain direct access to.

Outsider site access experience in the Tanzanian prison system: Mohamed

Because of the nature of the study setting (prisons) and Mohamed's plan that was approved by the New Zealand university's HREC, he had to visit the Prison Department Headquarters to gain a research permit which would allow him to visit the prisons. Instead of sending letters by mail, Mohamed made a physical visit to the headquarters and engaged in formal face-to-face conversations with authorities to clarify doubts regarding his study (Monahan & Fisher, 2015). Then he handed them a consent form and introductory letters, including the one from his supervisor because, as anticipated by Mohamed, the authorities wanted a formal letter from the university. Mohamed was promised feedback after one week. However, when he visited the week after, there was no reply. Instead, he was told to wait longer. The next time he visited the office (after two weeks) and still found no response, Mohamed asked to see the senior person because he was told that the file was still in that person's office. Unfortunately, the responsible person was not available. Therefore Mohamed had to re-book an appointment the following week. It is important to note that Mohamed was living in a town about 200km away from the headquarters; every trip to seek that permission entailed a 400km round trip.

On the appointment day, Mohamed was not able to meet with the senior person in charge. Instead, he was sent to one of the subordinates who also could not respond to his request. The experience Mohamed had is consistent with that of Monahan and Fisher (2015), who warned that sometimes instead of providing "definitive rejections, these sites normally will delay making any decision, saying things like, 'Now's not a good time' or 'I'll have to check with someone else,' or they simply will not respond at all" (p. 722). With all these delaying tactics in the headquarters, and considering that prisons are considered total institutions (Goffman, 1962), arguably, the Prison Management considered Mohamed an *outsider* as he was not part of the prison staff (Greene, 2014). Perhaps they found it difficult to accept and trust him.

Mohamed had only six months allocated for data collection, and with almost a month already gone and permission not yet granted, he discussed his predicament with some other prison officers. They suggested he seek a research permit from the Regional Commissioner Offices, where the prisons he wanted to study were located. Mohamed communicated with his supervisors back in New Zealand, who advised him to write to the University HREC for approval to the changes in access modality, which he received. Having that approval, Mohamed visited the Regional Offices, where the prisons he intended to visit were located. With copies of the letter from his supervisor, his introduction letter and consent form attached, he applied for research permission, which was granted this time; perhaps because the Regional Commissioner Officers were civilians and they work for a higher authority (Prime Minister's Office). With permission from the Regional Commissioners, the district offices connected Mohamed with the prisons of interest to the study. However, some prisons did not accept him. Therefore Mohamed had to find prisons which were ready to participate (another example of an 'invisible hand' influencing whose knowledge could be accessed). In contrast to the challenge of accessing prisons, Mohamed had no trouble accessing the Institute of Adult Education and individual respondents outside prisons. Perhaps the Institute of Adult Education considered Mohamed a *partial insider* (Greene, 2014), as he knew some people in the office and he was conducting research related to Adult Education. Despite the challenges in negotiating access, the individual respondents expressed feelings of being valued by being contacted to share their experiences.

^{iv} Tanzanian prisons are categorised into three: maximum security/central prisons; medium security/district prisons; and low security/agricultural/open prisons.

Limitations and strengths

One limitation of this qualitative study relates to the contextual nature of the findings. In this article we have referred to our own projects which characterise the problematics of accessing research sites and participants. In both ventures, seeking access to research sites (even after ethical consent was granted) presented challenges for the researchers, but it is up to the reader to determine how relevant these findings may be in other contexts. The fact that a researcher's personal bias can impact upon a qualitative study may be another limitation. Therefore, to add strength to this study, insights were combined from two doctoral researchers, who are experienced work professionals in higher education as well as insights from a third senior educational research practitioner.

Conclusion

This article is concerned with illustrating the complexity of the issue of accessing research sites and participants, a matter which has been under-explored in the education research literature. Nonetheless, it is already known that gatekeepers and *kaiārahi* (guides) can help or hinder access to research sites and participants, and that the more or less powerful dynamics of researcher relationships with these people impacts research processes. Our own experiences echo those in the literature and, importantly, illustrate that intentional consideration of power relationships and deliberately taking time to develop the trust of gatekeepers, *kaiārahi* and participants can develop the shared understanding needed to gain and maintain access. Resilience is a key factor in a researcher sustaining commitment against the odds. For researchers working in diverse cultural spaces and with participatory research approaches it may be helpful to note the more participatory and collaborative role of a *kaiārahi* than of a gatekeeper. Illustrated by the two case studies presented in this article, our findings highlight: a) the relevance of *insider/outsider* status; b) the need to engage in repeated negotiations to obtain the agreement and consent of gatekeepers; c) the value of identifying *kaiārahi* and building relationships; d) the importance of understanding organisational culture, power dynamics of relationships and of knowledge production; and e) the significance of operating in a transparent manner around researcher identity and related to the nature of the specific study. In Diana's access experience into the *wānanga*, honesty around the researcher's personal identity was as key to the negotiation of access as the university backing was to the Tanzanian case study.

Looking at some of Monahan and Fisher's (2015) strategies of how access is gained, both Diana and Mohamed used very much the same approach of finding the names of potential gatekeepers or *kaiārahi* and making calls to meet them. In some cases, this was a success, yet in others, it was not. Furthermore, both communicated legitimacy of their studies in a variety of different ways to earn the trust of gatekeepers and *kaiārahi*. Both visited appropriate offices and potential gatekeepers and *kaiārahi* to build rapport and explain why they should be trusted. Coordinating coincidence and making unannounced visits was relevant in both cases. As proposed by Monahan and Fisher (2015), while in the field, these research students initiated and followed up on 'multiple leads' simultaneously. Ultimately, mobilising indirect access overcame the access barrier for Mohamed when he produced the introduction letter from his Chief Supervisor and looked for alternative gatekeepers and an experienced respondent outside the prison system. It was the same for Diana when the endorsement of a work colleague facilitated an introduction to the person who became her *kaiārahi*.

Lastly, in considering how the research process evolves, we conclude that the significant power gatekeepers and *kaiārahi* possess requires careful consideration. The misconnections between the processes of gaining access as submitted during ethics application processes with what occurs in practice is largely ignored by the literature, yet commonly faced by research practitioners. A research plan may be approved as ethical but may not prove to be practical when the researcher tries to enact it, thus necessitating modification and in some cases, going beyond orthodox methods. The challenge becomes one of finding a practice that is ethical for a particular group and context. Our research highlights the importance of some key strategies which have not previously been prominent in the

literature. However, these are tentative findings which would benefit from being tested in other researchers' experiences. These are intentional consideration of insider/outsider status, allowing time for repeated negotiations, identifying kaiārahi and building relationships; and gaining an understanding of organisational culture, power dynamics of relationships and knowledge production. We propose that education researchers, who are able to successfully negotiate the power dynamics and build respectful relationships with gatekeepers, kaiārahi, and participants, need to communicate their knowledge and experiences of the process of accessing research participants with other researchers.

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