

**Abstract:** We live in a data-driven world. The voluminous scale of data gathered can lead to diminished consciousness of ethics whilst economic interests are prioritised. Across recent decades education has come to be heavily data driven and datafied. We have witnessed the dehumanising and increased labour impacts of school datafication. In search for alternatives, we wonder about the role and hope of story. We look to the etymological roots of data to see how a relationship with story may work to foreground ethicality, through attention to positionality, values, presence, representation and form. As education researchers of differing socio-cultural backgrounds, we bring diverse illustrations of how these five considerations feature in our research with educational data and trouble the politics of education data in a post-truth world. To further resonate a merging of story with data for ethical research, we apply Derrida's metonymic logos: "cinders there are", reminding us of the traces of life in data. We close with questions to inform ethical consciousness to storied data with transparent attention to positionality, values, presence, representation and form.

**Keywords:** Cinders; data; ethicality; giving; story; storying

## Introduction

We are a group of four educational researchers inquiring into the effects of standardised test data, and associated processes of the quantification of education, on the work and learning of system personnel, teachers and students in schools in England, Australia, Singapore and Bangladesh. In this four-year study we aim to locate an alternative, more hopeful approach to the dominant, deficit discourses of datafication in education. We muse over the role and hope of story in alternatives to school datafication. This paper plots our theoretical and methodological exploration of relationships between data and stories.

Data are ubiquitous in the 21<sup>st</sup> century life at the individual, social, institutional, and political spheres. Story has also been an essential feature of human life and culture to understand the complexities of humanity (Nussbaum, 1997), "make sense of the anomalous", and "sustain individual and group identities" (Polletta, 2006, p. 7), since the conception of language. How do data and story relate to each other? Can data be storied? And can story be datafied? This paper seeks to explore these underexplored questions about data and story and argues for a storied approach to data. As "big data" have come to govern human life in a datafied world (see Kitchin, 2021), we wonder if a storied approach to data can ensure ethical engagement with data. Story promotes a relational view as opposed to dominant conceptions of data as impersonal, scientific and de-contextualised, with the in-built capacity to speak by themselves and to be taken as unquestioned evidence for knowledge (Selwyn, 2021a).

To understand how data as a concept has come to be understood in contemporary dominant discourses of datafication in education, we trace the historical roots of data as evidence. Since the seventeenth century, we have come to know 'data' as information gathered to be examined, defined and used (Rosenburg, 2013). 'Data' with this meaning was born out of enlightenment thinking driven by reason, factual (data-informed) knowledge and argumentation. Yet, its origins lie in the Latin singular noun 'datum' meaning "(thing) given", past participle of dare "to give" (Harper, 2021a). "A 'datum' in English, then, is something given in an argument, something taken for granted" or as the plural 'data' emerged

in early seventeenth century as “quantities given in a mathematical problem” (Rosenburg, 2013, p. 18, 19). Rosenburg considered this early definition of data as rhetorical: “that which is given prior to argument” and as “a consequence, the meaning of data must always shift with argumentative strategy and context” (p. 36). He went on to argue that the rhetorical agenda of the term ‘data’ has made it “indispensable” (p.37). Data has certainly come to be indispensable in contemporary schooling. Schools increasingly monitor data across a variety of realms, including personal, attendance as well as academic performance, all of which contribute to increased datafication and increased labour as part of the digitalisation of increased data generation (Selwyn, 2021b; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

If we understand ‘rhetoric’ as “the art of speaking or writing effectively” (Merriam-Webster, 2021), a relationship between data and story can be proposed; on such a rendering, like data, stories communicate meaning a/effectively and are themselves a gift. Phillips and Bunda (2018) “name the practice of dedicated sharing [of stories] as *gifting* to honour age old tradition, the intimacy and bonding that deliberate shared storying nurtures” and “see stories as treasures and storying as reciprocal” (p. 87). Stories and data can both be argued to be rhetorical, and both seek to gift meaning.

In the global North many have noted the powerful capacity of story to communicate; this includes philosophers (e.g., see Arendt 1958/1998; Benjamin, 1955/1999), psychologists (e.g., Bruner, 1986), literary scholars (e.g., Gottschall, 2012), anthropologists (e.g., Jackson, 2002), and entrepreneurs (e.g., Richard Branson), to name but a few. Communication expert Nancy Duarte has explicitly argued that what data needs is a good storyteller to transform numbers into a persuasive story in her book *DataStory* (2019). The word ‘story’ emerged in English in the 1200s, derived from the Latin word ‘*historia*’, referring to an account of what had happened; the roots of story are embedded in the sharing of life’s happenings (Smith, W. 2007). A distinction from the word ‘*history*’ developed in the 1500s (Harper, 2021b) leading to a categorisation of history as truth and story as untruth/fiction. Story as a euphemism for ‘a lie’ dates from the 1690s (Harper, 2021b). For Indigenous peoples, there were always stories (see Archibald, 2008; Chawla, 2011; King, 2003; Bunda in Phillips & Bunda, 2018), as Native American scholar Thomas King (2003) declared, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). Further, Indian scholar Devika Chawla (2011) names humans as “storying” beings, and African feminist scholar Saroljini Nadar (2014) asserts that stories are “data with soul” (p.27).

The scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (and subsequent age of enlightenment) spawned the lexical reconstitution of *historia* to story, and *datum* to data. Scientific thinking explained the natural world as “an orderly domain governed by strict mathematical-dynamical laws”, in which authority of knowledge was not claimed until subjected to rigorous skeptical questioning (Bristow, 2017, para 1). History was understood as a “systematic account (without reference to time) of a set of natural phenomena” from the mid-1500s to the late 1800s (Harper, 2021c). Scientific thinking shaped understandings and applications of the words: ‘*history*’<sup>1</sup> and ‘*data*’. Rationalism, empiricism and skepticism of enlightenment thinking informed history as a discipline of scholarship and data as evidence, with one of the earliest illustrative examples considered to be Joseph Priestley’s<sup>2</sup> 1788 lectures on History and General policy (Rosenburg, 2013). The legacy of enlightenment’s skepticism

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<sup>1</sup> History became a distinct discipline of scholarship in the late 1700s (Hamerow, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Priestley is recognised as an early innovator in data graphics, especially for his work 1765 *Chart of Biography* (Rosenburg, 2013).

continues to determine what is truth and untruth, what is authorised knowledge and unauthorised knowledge. ‘Story’ has only relatively recently been welcomed into authorised research scholarship as “local situated truths” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 4).

The rhetorical nature of data as ‘given for an argument’ differs from the rhetorical nature of story. Perhaps it may be experienced as a difference between direct and indirect communication, though we recognise the distinction between data and story cannot be simply binarised, especially considering differing storytelling styles across cultures and communication practices. The indirect communication of story offers symbolism and, as Arendt famously wrote, “storytelling reveals meaning without the error of defining it” (1970, p. 105). Interpretation of meaning is open to the listener/reader of a story, whereas the author of an argument wants to convince the listener/reader of a precise point of meaning. Storying is alive, it is a process of “making emergent meaning with data slowly over time through stories” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 7). By seeing story with data as story/data, ethical relationality in research can be foregrounded.

We wonder how story and data can work together as we come together for an Australia Research Council study on storying alternatives to school datafication. This paper maps how our storied discussions of how to methodologically unite roots of gifting and communicating a/effectively through storied data and data stories. We see ethicality as central to a relationship between story and data. In recognising gifting as a mutual intent of both story and data, we look to Barad’s (2010) reminder that rooted in gifting is responsibility: the ability to respond to an-other. Barad explains the relations that define responsibility as the ability to respond, that is, a matter of inviting, welcoming and enabling the response of the Other: “Responsibility is not an obligation’ and ‘is not a calculation to be performed [...] It is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness” (p. 265). We see that storying can enable and enact such understandings of responsibility. Storying is emergent and responsive to audiences (receivers of the story/ies). If data are storied with relational ethical responsibility, then the practice of being with data may bring greater relational ethical consciousness to the response-ability of positionality, values, presence, representation and form. As Hughes (2005) explains, “Ethical practice is an ongoing interaction of values in shifting contexts and relationships” (p. 231). The roots of narrative inquiry (which *stories* life experiences to make meaning) are very much concerned with relational ethics (Clandinin, 2013). However, from thinking and working with the five principles of storying that Louise developed with Ngugi and Wakka Wakka woman Tracey Bunda (Phillips & Bunda, 2018), we argue that attention to positionality, values, presence, representation and form – not just values, are key to developing a more ethical disposition. We look to storying because of its accessibility across ages, culture, and ability spoken, written, danced, performed, drawn, painted, and/or filmed stories offer along with how they can foreground the marginalised (e.g., Phillips & Bunda; Chawla, 2011).

Across the following five sections we explain each of these five ethical considerations, their purpose in story/data as a merged concept in educational research, with illustrative examples of how we have each responded to (and developed) these dispositions and capacities in our research practice with story/data in education.

### **Positionality/standpoint/locating self**

In storying, positionality is foregrounded, by locating self, foregrounding identity and relationality to place and with those storied (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Positionality has its roots in critical (e.g., Marx & Engels, 1848), feminist (see feminist standpoint theory e.g., Harding, 1986; Hill Collins, 1990) and Indigenous research (e.g., Nakata, 2007; Kovach,

2010). From critical theory roots, positionality is about critiquing the influence of class and power, highlighting injustice and oppression. In feminist standpoint theory, the idea of standpoint is about defining the socio-historical-political knowledge space from which one speaks. In Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies, locating self by naming connection to place/land/country and kinship occurs, as Saskatchewan scholar Cam Willett explains:

through the protocol of introductions. It shows respect to the ancestors and allows community to locate us. Situating self implies clarifying one's perspective on the world.

This is about being congruent with a knowledge system that tells us that we can only interpret the world from the place of our experience (in Kovach, 2010, p. 110).

Storying positionality/ standpoint/ locating self is how research relationships commence and research stories start. To set the scene, we locate ourselves.

*Louise:* I am a fifth-generation white Australian woman of Irish convict, English and German settler ancestry located on Yuggera country (an uncomfortable privilege which I have critically inquired into across my adult years). I am mother to three sons, sister to four brothers and one sister, daughter to a loquacious matriarch and World War II veteran and mechanic (now deceased). I am neurodiverse and so have a strong social justice drive and empathy with people on the margins. Storying is how I make sense of the world. My working life is three blurred storied chapters as an early childhood teacher, a storyteller, and academic.

*Obaid:* I am a Bangla-speaking first-generation Bangladeshi immigrant living on Yuggera country. From humble beginnings in a rural, working-class community in northern Bangladesh, I am the first person in all generations of my family to complete high school and university, and become an academic, initially in Bangladesh and now in Australia. I am husband to a Bangladeshi woman and father to three children. Having taken up Australian citizenship, I am unlikely to return to Bangladesh permanently, but my sense of national, social and cultural belonging is divided between Australia and Bangladesh. I self-identify as a non-white, non-native English speaking Muslim male academic in a discursive space dominated by white, native-English scholars of Anglo-Western backgrounds. My acquired Australian identity may allow me to bypass the effects of the discourses of belonging to a poor nation in the Global South. My Australian colleagues are free from some of these features of oppression, but my Bangladeshi colleagues face them as lived realities in academia.

*Vicente:* I am a Filipino-Chinese, naturalised Australian now living in the United Kingdom. Before embarking on graduate degrees in the political sociology of education reforms in Australia and Singapore, I was a school principal in the Philippines. My familial identities cross many borders, as I am married to an academic from mainland China and am father to a child with dual Filipino and Australian citizenship. I am acutely aware that the personal and professional space in which I find myself is fluid and global and very much intertwined with tensions that emanate from this space such as powerful discourses of performativity and counternarratives of decolonisation. My acquired Australian identity (similar to Obaid) sets me apart – uncomfortably.

*Ian:* I am a white middle-class Australian man with English, Irish (father) and Italian (mother) ancestry. Like Louise and Obaid, I also live on Yuggera country although my family has roots in Ngarabal country. I am an uncle, an academic and have lived and worked in rural and urban settings in Queensland and New South Wales, as well as stints overseas as part of my work in Australian universities. I also share the unease of Louise and am far less knowledgeable about the circumstances of Indigenous peoples in the communities in which I live (Yuggera) and

engage (Ngarabal) but feel privileged to be able to engage with Yuggera peoples to develop better understandings of country. I am conscious of how white privilege places me at an advantage within a colonised country which struggles to come to terms with its history.

We all worked together previously at The University of Queensland, Australia, though now Vicente works at University of Bristol, UK and Louise at Southern Cross University. We gather together through our mutual research interest in data/stories in education that are silenced or marginalised and drowned out by more dominant data narratives, such as ‘big data’ in educational discourses. In thinking through Boveda and Annama’s (2023) provocations of power, oppression in intersectionality in positionality, we recognise that some of us share identity traits with some research participants more than others. Louise particularly resonates with the adversity female participants and diversely abled identities experience. Obaid connects with those with non-native English language identities entangled in an interlocking system of oppression. Vicente shares identity traits with diasporic participants who find themselves situated in pluralistic societies. Ian connects with the oppression participants feel in relation to neoliberal and managerial modes of work to be constantly available and responsive. We recognise that “[d]ifferent aspects of identities may become foregrounded at different times and may alter the dynamics of the research” (Brooks, te Riele & Maguire, 2015, p. 100). As Obaid explains, working with research participants and colleagues in and outside Australia has enabled him to note differences in our identities and resist any essentialising temptations. Louise and Ian are aware of the racism, faithism, and westernism that Obaid and Vicente experience, but they don’t really bodily know these oppressions, just as Obaid, Vicente and Ian don’t really bodily know the sexism Louise lives through.

In proposing a relationship between story and data, a consciousness and questioning of the influence of identity, place, power/privilege, ontology and epistemology in the collecting, analysis and representation of data is foregrounded. We argue that knowing positionality (identity, location and live experiences) of people in data in education is necessary to deeply come to understand identity variance (Boveda & Annamma, 2023), be it for teaching and learning purposes or for research. It is through such knowing that we bring the human into number patterns.

## **Values**

In acknowledging our origins, where questions are asked but also questions of how and why emerge. In asking how and why, values come more to the fore. Values inform which way we do storying. ‘Which way’ is a first point of conversation in Torres Strait Islander<sup>3</sup> communities. “The words are at once a greeting but simultaneously ask questions, from speaker to listener, of where have you been, what for, what are you/we doing, how and why and when?” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 73). The Torres Strait Islander phrasing ‘which way’ offers a direct and succinct provocation to clarify the values that imbue practice. Values inform our “purpose (why) and our practices (how) for locating, gathering, and responsibly caring for locating stories” (pp. 79-80). For example, in valuing equity, we seek to ensure stories from the margins are expressed and heard. With an ethical consciousness to research, the values of justice (reciprocity of access, benefits, and experience), beneficence (ethic of care), and respect (dignity and agency honoured) are embedded in research codes of ethics in various nations (e.g., in the Australian context, see NHMRC, 2018). These codes of ethics largely followed the Belmont Report (United States’ National Commission for the Protection

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<sup>3</sup> The Torres Strait Islands are located in the northern regions of Australia (Cape York Peninsula), between Australian and Papua New Guinea. They are a territory of the state of Queensland, Australia.

of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) which established the first set of dedicated principles for research with humans<sup>4</sup>. We see it as necessary to be conscious of our values and how they shape our interactions with participants, data and context, and continuously critique value enactment. The following vignettes illustrate our values (signposted in italics) in action within our research practices.

*Louise*: In storying research, my main value is to respectfully enable, hold and share stories from often unheard voices. Drawing from Davies (2014), Pink (2009) and Tuhiwai Smith (2012), I seek to craft deep, rich, embodied sensorial, relational understandings of phenomena by listening and being with communities with my whole being that invite readers/listeners to come to understand another position. To do so, I take time to build relationships.

Let me tell you a story that offers a resonant illustration of my *value of reciprocal trust* at play. I was researching young children's citizenship at an Aboriginal Australian-governed early learning centre. I visited the centre with an Aboriginal co-researcher multiple times to get to know staff, talk about the centre, community, early childhood education, and the project, before we entered the classrooms. I played with the children and took part in the daily activities – playing inside and out, setting up equipment, comforting children, serving food, cleaning, and settling children to sleep. I did everything the educators did. I understood this as a cultural value of the Aboriginal Australian community – if you are there, you are responsible – you contribute. One four-year old boy, new to the centre and quite unsettled by changes in his life was very interested in the cameras we were using for the research. We shared one with him to use. He had a small backpack of toys that he carried everywhere, until one day a football game started up outdoors. And he walked over to me and placed his bag at my feet, then ran over to join the game. An educator nearby looked at me, surprised: “that’s the first time I’ve seen him without that bag.” I don’t recall him looking back to check. When we caught eyes later on, I smiled, nodded and gave him the thumbs up, and pointed to the bag and I together. He smiled back.

*Obaid*: Based on my life experiences and influenced by critical as well as postcolonial theories, my research engagement has been informed by *values of equity and justice* in education and society. Having personally experienced upward social mobility from socioeconomic disadvantage, I have sought to understand the voices, experiences and struggles of disadvantaged students as they travel through the ragged path of education. My research has focused on the English language, which is often represented as a passport to individual mobility and social progress. I have sought to interrogate these instrumentalist discourses of English for individuals and communities from critical and ethical perspectives. However, the literature that I draw on may still keep me at a distance from multiple marginalised communities as I have not engaged with people who have no access to English due to class, gender or ability factors.

*Vicente*: My tenure as a bureaucrat in a central office of schools as well as a school leader in the Philippines was inured by systemic corruption. In my current research and consultancy work in schooling systems, I critically interrogate governance reforms in education, particularly in developing nations advocating for the promotion and protection of the value of *social justice*. Championing governance reforms in developing countries, mired in widespread corruption, is fraught with ethical dilemmas. In these contexts, asymmetrical power often prevails, with voices of marginalised education stakeholders either disappearing or being

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<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge that these guidelines were informed by a longer lineage of ethical ideas, including those emanating from the Nuremberg Trials after World War II and the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (‘Helsinki Declaration’).

forgotten (Reyes, Hamid, & Hardy, 2022). Thus, it becomes imperative to document their storied experiences of contesting power amidst a wicked state of affairs — situations that demand constant ethical reflections.

*Ian:* Notions of *respect* resonate strongly for me in relation to my work with teachers and other educators in schools and schooling systems around the world, but particularly in Queensland, Australia. When I think about the hundreds of teachers in schools whom I have listened to over the years, on reflection, their stories come back to me. I think about the teachers who have said that this is the first time someone has taken the time to listen to them intently about the nature of their work and the challenges they face. To be able to talk to someone who is not there to judge but simply to listen and to try to understand their work, what they are experiencing (the difficulties, as well as the joys) is a gift not always given.

This prefacing of values clarifies how we story, as both receivers and makers of meaning. Indeed, “[s]torying is a multi-directional process of meaning making: of receiving and creating stories. Our practice of listening and receiving stories informs how we (re)create stories. We see both as very attuned emergent and responsive praxis” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, pp. 82-83). Values shape research practices, what is sought as data, whose voices are heard, which story/data are chosen as evidence for results, and story/data authorship.

### **Presence**

In a storying methodology, we are not separate from the research context, but very much *present* with people, place and their stories. As Norman Denzin (1989) argued, ‘meaningful interpretations of human experience can only come from those persons who have thoroughly immersed themselves in the phenomenon they wish to interpret and understand’ (p. 26). The roots of being present come from participatory and critical ethnography (e.g., see Denzin), autoethnography (e.g., see Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 1995/2018; Wyatt & Adams, 2014) and narrative inquiry (e.g., see Clandinin, 2013). In being present, “[i]n storying, people, places and time are alive” as we submit to “full embodied sensation and perception” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p.39). A commitment to presence is a fidelity to being there with those we listen to; a commitment to stories unfolding in real time. As narrative inquirer, Jean Clandinin (2013) explains “We remain as wakeful as we can be to who we are in the inquiry space and to how our presence shapes spaces between us and participants” (p. 199). Stories/data imprint on our minds and senses. We feel and submit to being affected by those to whom we listen – to what anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007) refers to as “ordinary affects” that happen

in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something* (p. 2).

Relational ethics brings forth responsibility to attentiveness and presence (Bateson, 1994). The story/data we sense are gifts to openly receive. In our allegiance to decolonising research and principles of reciprocity and relationality, we also honour presence as what Tuhiwai Smith (2012) referred to as ‘showing face’ in being present at cultural events and following cultural protocols.

*Louise:* To illustrate presence, I draw from my experience of the Walking Neighbourhood hosted by children project in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Without Thai language, all I could do was point, smile and nod as Seemie [six-year-old girl] took my hand and led the way on her “Mermaid walk”. With the anticipation of the unknown and unfamiliar and the rising

temperature and humidity, sweat slipped between our hands, yet Seemie continued to carefully attend to holding my hand. Beads of sweat developed on her petite forehead...I felt for Seemie, diligently committed to holding my hand and leading the walk to her desired Mermaid house. I wondered if she was perspiring from the heat alone or was she anxious about leading the walk and having responsibility for a farang (foreigner). She continued to smile sweetly at me and carefully hold my hand (Phillips, 2016, p. 336).

By committing to being present with Seemie, I sensed and felt so much more, immersing in the moment, rather than focusing on a predetermined research agenda, and what happened before or what would happen after.

*Vicente:* How does corruption impact schooling? This is a question that I continue to engage with and reflect upon in my work. In order to gain an appreciation and understanding of this phenomenon, I seek out ‘actors’ (from diverse educational contexts) and situate myself in their workplaces to listen to their ‘stories’. In so doing, I have found myself listening to a distraught and beleaguered school property officer in a cramped and damp stock room recounting how helpless he felt in resisting widespread practices of misappropriation of resources. I have also been inside the imposing room of a defiant and combative senior school superintendent, surrounded by armed bodyguards, who refuted accusations of embezzling funds and who asked me repeatedly if I was a journalist writing an expose. In these diverse encounters, my sense of presence was reinforced by how I experienced contrasting and confusing tensions: the need to discover the ‘truth’, the anxiety of self-preservation and the struggle to ensure that I adhered to the ethical guidelines that governed my research project.

*Ian:* One of the teachers in a school I visited frequently in the northern regions of Queensland had taught over almost a 50-year time-span. In being present with her living oral archives (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) of beginning teaching at a time when teachers had only a one-year certificate (which they were then expected to upgrade), I was palpably drawn into her concerns about recent changes – particularly the increased focus on standardized test scores as a marker of student achievement. These concerns were not about the effects of these reforms upon herself but upon her colleagues as they strove to try to ensure productive learning experiences for students and for the students themselves as they sometimes became depleted by so much attention to literacy and numeracy results.

Presence evokes affected sensibilities of being with data/stories, feeling sweat, anxiety, desires, struggles, helplessness, fear, and the despair of depletion as described above. Data are not disembodied, but connected to people, places and time. Sensing people, place and relationalities brings further layers of understandings.

## **Representation**

In receiving the gifts of stories/data, we carefully consider representation of the actors, places and problems as a poetic and ethical endeavour - a poiesis (making) with aesthesis (sensation that produces affect), so that the stories are felt as the lived experiences of the audience (Benjamin, 1995/1999). Though we are acutely aware that what we share will never fully represent the people we meet and their lived experiences, as Bhattacharya (2017) acknowledges, the best we can do is re-present the information shared with us (p. 158). We ponder ‘what are our responsibilities in and to story making?’ Nature writer, Barry Lopez (1990), espouses the care required in the receiving and gifting of stories:



If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. (p. 60)

Through relational ethics, narrative inquirers “respectfully represent participants’ lived and told stories” being “attentive to the relational spaces we are co-composing” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 200, 201). With respect for the privilege of being gifted story-data, there are relational responsibilities in how the stories (and the people of the stories) are told/represented. Sometimes this may require “fictionalizing and blurring of times, places, and identities” to defer potential participant vulnerability (p. 200) through efforts for anonymity and confidentiality. At the same time we recognise the need to 'blur' various representations of story, we do not conform to quantitative notions that 'disaggregating' data would 'spoil' anonymity, but instead argue that, qualitative rather than quantitative data and analyses are more likely to present more substantive accounts, perspectives and positionalities of participants/co-contributors and, that notions of 'disaggregation' themselves imply reductive notions of identification that do not typically 'capture' the myriad identities and positionalities of participants. Decisions about representation of people, places and times are guided by “fidelity to relationships” (Noddings, 1986) with careful attention to critical moments and politically and ethically sensitive negotiations (Bhattacharya, 2017). Here, Louise, Obaid and Vicente share some reflections of the thoughts and ideas that guide our practices in story/data re-presentation.

*Louise:* The preceding considerations of positionality, values and presence all influence how I attend to re-presentations of data/stories. A guiding thought is if this was me (as if I was in the shoes of those with whom I engage), how would I wish to be re-presented? With great care and respect, I tend to the story/data gifted to me. I share crafted stories back with those who they re-present whenever I possibly can, to seek their authorisation. Many proudly want to be referred to by their real names. To date no one who I have re-presented in research has communicated a mis-representation. I continue to question and verify to respectfully honour their authorship of their story/ies. “Ethical questions are ever present in the collective ownership and authorship of storying” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p, 69).

*Obaid:* The politics and ethics of representation substantially define my researcher self and agency. I am aware of Hornberger's (2015) notion of “methodological rich points” which demands ethical humility on our part as researchers, as we come to appreciate that our tools of research and representation—however sophisticated they are—are in fact inadequate in capturing the lived lives and experiences of our participants. At the same time, I am guided by an abiding sense of respect for the voices of participants which should count as “social scientific data” (Bhaskar, 1986). I am also mindful of the potential of over- or under-representing people, their languages or their perspectives, particularly when we work with disadvantaged groups who may also speak different languages or language variants. Finally, the act of representation has become much more complicated in a post-truth world, creating dilemmas for researchers (Hamid & Jahan, 2021). This calls for more sensitivity and ethical awareness on our part.

*Vicente:* In school systems described as suffering from systemic corruption and a dysfunctional bureaucracy, whose voices should be heard? This is an ethical quandary that I encounter as I carry out my avowed role of critically interrogating governance reforms. An approach that I strive to adhere to of “purposely assuming perspectives of key actors” (Reyes, 2009, p. 519) is fraught with tensions. Should I give prominence to the highly influential Minister of Education who provides a convincing justification of the historical and social causes of persistent

education crises? Or should it be the grizzled school administrator in the war-ravaged Southern Philippines who convincingly argues that being outside of the metropolis makes him and his colleagues invisible in the grand scheme of governance reforms? Or perhaps, it should be the Teachers' Union leader who has been detained on numerous occasions for her persistent acts of civil disobedience in her efforts to highlight the impact of corruption on schools? I cautiously discern these firsthand stories I hear amidst a muddy web of *alingawngaw* (an onomatopoeia term for echoed rumours in Filipino) that dominates public discourse of education in the Philippines.

How people, places and time are represented in story/data are of significant ethical concern. From the naming choices to descriptive words used, attention to respectful representation is constant. Attention to identities, locations, age and other temporal circumstances attend to varied realities. Disaggregated quantitative data can offer some insight to domains of diversity patterns of advantage/disadvantage, story goes into the flesh of lived reality.

Though story/data can be disembodied (Back, 2007) and disconnected from their origins (of people, places and time), as researchers, we see ourselves as guardians of story/data, imbued with significant ethical responsibilities to ensure that connections of origin are not simply present but foregrounded with respect.

### **Form**

In storying, we consider the form of the stories/data we publicly share with due protocol and responsibility; crafted for specific audiences. In considering the responsibility of form, we draw from Phillips and Bunda's (2018) dialogue on bringing stories to life. Stories are made (poiesis) with sensation that produces affect (aesthesia), so that they are felt as the lived experiences of the audience (Benjamin, 1955/1999). Form needs to be carefully chosen to best evoke understanding of lived experiences with the audiences who we see as necessary to influence for the research to have 'impact'<sup>5</sup>. Bhattacharya (2017) advises on the importance of knowing who the audience is who may benefit from the insight of the study, and crafting data stories to this audience. We now have the great luxury of so many story-making digital and analogue mediums at our fingertips – we can use words, imagery, and sound to create stories through visual essays, comic strips, poetic layouts, typed scripts, spoken and sung words, to name some modes. Visualisation in story/data offers clarity, sharpening thinking in the research (Bhattacharya). We can also construct stories from any combination of modes and mediums (words and imagery). Ethicality is central to choosing the most appropriate and relevant form, for respectful representation of researched lives and rhetorical influence with relevant audiences.

*Louise:* In thinking carefully about story/data form to gift back to the people whose stories I have listened to and been gifted, I look to forms and platforms that are accessible to the community with whom I have researched. For example, in research with young children, I have drawn upon the work of video-cued multivocal ethnography (e.g., Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989) and edited video footage of the children to craft story/data as a 'movie' shared at family gatherings. With commitment to ethical research and child agency, children co-selected the footage (Robson, 2011) to feature in the 'movie' - a text form they readily read/interpreted.

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<sup>5</sup> We are conscious that within the current academic landscape, issues of 'impact' have attracted increased attention, often for more performative, managerial reasons. The way in which we use the term impact here is more in keeping with a genuine desire to effect substantive and productive improvements in the lives of those with whom we engage, which is a key motivation for much of the work that we do.

The sharing of the video at family gatherings provided an accessible platform, which brought community together to celebrate and come to understand the children's participation in the projects. For one Indigenous community, the films were uploaded to a community created YouTube channel, so the community had ongoing control of access, to proactively attend to principles of Indigenous leadership and data governance (AIATSIS, 2020).

*Obaid:* I have sought to present the stories of my research participants and their lived experiences for the audience who should/hope to be reading them—policymakers, educators and researchers. Although I have mainly relied on common academic genres such as journal articles and book chapters, these specialist texts often include slices of life in the form of stories or vignettes. For example, in questioning the fairness and justice of the use of a global English proficiency test in Australian migration, with my colleague, we storied how a Peruvian woman's dream was shattered by testing policies (Hoang & Hamid, 2017). To make my research stories more accessible to the public (Zook, 2015), I have recently started writing opinion pieces in a newspaper in Bangladesh. I see this as a way of making my work relevant to society, a form that has been recently adopted by many academics (Frakt et al., 2018).

*Ian:* Like Obaid, I mostly draw upon more formal academic genres (journal articles, book chapters, monographs) to tell stories of school practices and experiences. However, as many of these participants are teachers and school-based administrators (principals, deputy principals, heads of curriculum), and because their work-day is usually incredibly busy, I also try to present research findings in a readily digestible summary report. In this way, I seek to be cognisant of the everyday pressures and more 'performative accountabilities' that characterize their practice (Ian, 2021), and the sorts of 'entrepreneurial' governance that attends these models (Wilkins, Gobby & Keddie, 2021). I present these reports in a way that is relevant to their everyday practice, and that reflects issues and concerns that are of importance to them. I usually present a more formal report to the principals in schools because I know they can use this as part of their own reporting/accountability responsibilities. I also provide feedback verbally to teachers. I try to deliberately engage with teachers in this way, building their trust in an environment which does not always value teachers' perspectives (Daliri, Hardy & Creagh, 2021). This approach is very much in keeping with seeking to 'reprofessionalise' the field of teacher judgment through professional learning (Gore, Rickards & Fray, 2023). I have also contributed articles/blogs about the key insights revealed by policy personnel and school-based personnel to help further inform the work of policy-makers, other researchers, and the general public more broadly.

With the premise of ethically storying data, publication choice is not driven by academic metrics, but rather with respect to the wishes and sensitivities of the research participants and contexts, and to maximise understanding of the research and influence relevant sector practices and broader publics. Publishing research in more formal formats (journals, chapters, monographs) sanctifies, locks or fixes certain kinds of positionality, values, presence, representation and form at a point in time and within the parameters of more dominant modes/forms. Positionality, values and representation can be fluid. Form is the vessel that holds the gifting of story/data that invite audiences to think, and being able to diversify the variety of forms we draw upon in our work ensures more diverse audiences and deeper engagement with the work.

### **“Cinders there are” in story and data**

To bring together our thoughts on ethically storying data, we now muse on Jacques Derrida's metonymic logos “Cinders there are” as an epigraph for traces of all that has lived in some of

his books (e.g., *Dissemination*, 1981). Derrida explains his imaginings of ‘cinders’ in his book titled *Cinders* (1991), dedicated to this metonymic logos as:

not here but there, as a story to be told: cinder, this old gray word, this dusty theme of humanity, the immemorial image had decomposed from within, a metaphor or metonymy of itself, such is the destiny of every cinder, separated, consumed like a cinder of cinders (p. 13).

Similarly, we propose that Derrida’s thinking on ‘cinders there are’ offers metaphoric understanding of the place of merged story/data in research. He suggests that “cinders” is a name for that which holds all beings and entities in presence. We see that ethically storied data can do such. Like the tiny flakes of cinders fire creates, story/data can hold “vulnerable tenderness” (p. 17) with careful attention to presentation. There are people, places, and interactions that we have observed and heard, though nothing tangible remains. There is no “cinder without fire” and without the “shadow of a sacrifice” (p. 19). Similarly, story/data are gifted and sparked through research catalysts. Once the catalytic moment of the story/data creation have gone, all that remain are ‘cinders’: the flaking fragments of researcher memories and recordings. The past is carried in the “gray dusty words” (p. 25) on pages of research publications:

But the urn of language is so fragile. It crumbles and immediately you blow into the dust of words that are the cinder itself. And if you entrust it to paper, it is all the better to inflame you with, my dear; you will eat yourself up immediately (p. 35).

In a commitment to ethical research, we attend to the fragility of story/data, honouring the lived moments as best we can at a point in time.

“Cinders there are” is a memorial to lost etymologies, lurking below the words used, such as the Latin word *datum* (something given in an argument) in data and *historia* (connected account or narration of some happening) in story. The words we choose to communicate meaning have all been used before and hold histories and baggage: “Our entire world is the cinder of innumerable living beings” (p. 51). Derrida proposes that the “there” in “Cinders there are” signifies the “innumerable lurks beneath the cinder. Incubation of the fire lurking beneath the Dust” (p. 41). Ethically storied data consciously attends to her/his-stories that lurk beneath the shared stories.

Story/data can be understood as “Cinders there are”, as a trace of a trace of a trace of people, places and times passed before. Derrida’s “cinders there are” offer a provocative reminder that data are of past and present lives, to move away from impersonal, scientific and de-contextualised engagement with data, but rather relational and ethical storied engagement that honours lives. As researchers ethically crafting story/data for public domains, we hope storied data, like cinders, settle on the being of audiences we approach and influence, catalysing ongoing resonances/echoes. Of course, once in the public domain we have no control of the resonances/echoes; some may be manipulated negatively or become *alingawngaw* (echoed rumours) or be touted as fake news.

### **Storying in a post-truth world**

Modern science has shunted story out of the domain of rigorous scholarship, privileging the truth of data as necessary facts/evidence as new knowledge. Objective truth takes the human away; muting relationality. Stories tell of living entities, places and times; they communicate “what it means to be human”, telling “of emplaced, relational tragedies, challenges and joys of living” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 3). This is why we propose a merging of story/data to bring relationality to data, so notions of story and data can work together to gift a/effectively new

knowledge. Numbers can catch an audience's attention and highlight patterns and trends, whilst stories will draw you in to the depths and flesh of lived realities, for understandings of where, how, why and what to emerge.

However, there are cautions to this proposition. Not all stories are crafted from an ethical premise. As Polletta (2006) accounts there are "views of stories as both idiosyncratic and democratizing, and as authentic and manipulable, views of stories as potent and powerless coexist in the popular imagination" (p. 25). Stories can be spun with data to manipulate and sway populations. For example, Michael Gove's erratic stories for UK schooling during his time as Minister for Education – initially going against grammar schools and then later on supporting the expansion of them in the UK (Rawlinson, 2016), – we argue this was heavily-influenced by how school performance data is used in school streaming (integrated, express, normal-academic, normal-technical) in Singapore (since the Goh Report of 1978) (Cook, 2012). He argued that students without the required 'mental capacity,' didn't belong in these schools. A policy and media story were crafted that privileged the elite and a traditional conception of 'academic'. The widespread media publicity of this story for UK schooling dominated education discourse in the UK for some time.

Story spin in media, crafted by politicians, journalists, and advertisers (to name principal culpable parties) dominate air/screen play of public communications. Storying research, differs through application of theory, and critically reflexive ongoing questioning, driven by seeking to understand phenomena. We propose foregrounding relationality in storying data, through ethical attentiveness to ongoing critically reflexive questioning of positionality, values, presence, representation and form in our research. Such explicit renderings and considerations provide certain assurances that help give credence and value to the stories being told, by transparently questioning authority of voice, multiplicity of perspectives, insider and outsider knowledge, power dynamics and bias. We see that data needs the relational features of story to alert us to its inherent human traces; this is particularly important as big data continue to grow and be commercially traded, privileging economic value (Srnicsek, 2017). Big data decisions are often made based on commercial value, rather than scientific value, let alone intrinsic human value. Big data usage is frequently exposed as unethical, such as The Snowden revelations of governments using the data to spy on their citizens as well as citizens from other nations, and The Facebook/ Cambridge Analytica scandal which demonstrated how data profiles of millions of people were utilised to influence their voting preference (Kitchin, 2021). An antidote to fake news and big data in a post-truth world, may well be ethically storied data.

### **Conclusion and implications for future research**

In research, a storied approach to data can bring data alive, in a rhetorical duet between lived experience/evidence and insight to accessibly, understandably and emotively share research with publics. Weaving story/data in a rhetorical duet must ethically attend to and preface positionality and values (so researcher biases and agendas are transparent and contextualised). In education research, along with social science research more broadly, researchers can do this by introducing who they are, where they are and the values that inform their practice at the opening of each publication and presentation of research. Throughout the entire research process, ethical storying of data can be attended to through careful decision-making on presence, representation and form (so participants are consistently engaged with as alive and respected in research story/data). We recommend asking the following questions to imbue ethicality in storied data when gathering story/data; when analysing story/data; when writing story/data; and when publishing/presenting story/data:

Am I really feeling/sensing what is going on here? (presence).

If I was in this story, how would I like to be re-presented? (representation)  
What vessel most respectfully honours the storied data to reach the audiences who will benefit?  
(form)

In our pursuit of a more hopeful approach to the dominant, deficit discourses of datafication in education, we have theoretically and methodologically looked to story and how it may ethically merge with data. To receive people's stories is an immense privilege and responsibility for researchers. To honour this immense privilege and responsibility, we invite researchers to share their positionality and values with honesty and humility just as de Oliveira (2021) urges in *Hospicing Modernity* and to respectfully attend to presence, representation and form with hyper reflexivity as traces/cinders of the complexities of life and living beings in story/data in formal and informal education systems. Further, this framework of positionality, values, presence, representation and form can guide critical reviews of storied data amidst the plethora of information in circulation to locate the degree of ethical relations the authors may have with the research context and participants.

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