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Engaging with and moving on from participatory research: a personal reflection.

In this paper, I respond to the call from Jones and Stanley (2010) to articulate experiences of the messy realities of participatory research. I reflect on my engagement and struggle with the realities and ethics of a piece of case study research, which set out with a participatory approach. The project involved a group of young people from an isolated rural community who appeared to be disconnecting from their secondary school. The research set out to develop understanding of the ways in which young people make connections (or not) in and with school, in order to further understanding of how schools might become more inclusive. A series of reflections on moments during the early stages of the research led to a significant shift in the methodological approach. The approach of this project eventually moved away from participatory research to an approach informed by Foucault's 'ethical project'. Here, the focus is on the subjection and practices of the researcher. It is argued that, on reflection, the 'ethical project' framework was more appropriate for this kind of research, where the complexities of participatory research were reducing the transparency of complex power structures.

Keywords

Participatory research, representation, schools, young people, rural, exclusion.

In this paper I respond to the call from Jones and Stanley (2010) to articulate experiences of the messy realities of participatory research, reflecting on my own engagement and struggle with a piece of research which set out to be a participatory project with young people from an isolated rural community in South West England. This project was defined in its early phases as 'participatory' but this position changed as the project developed with contingent shifting relations with, within and between the project, the young people involved and the researcher. In this paper, I reflect on how these shifts in positions revealed challenges to the methodological position that I had been taking and on the resulting decisions, I made to change the approach of the project.

This piece of research, which set out to democratise the research process, was positioned as inclusive research. The term 'inclusive research' was first used by Walmsley (2001) and developed later with Johnson (2003). In their context, of researching with people with intellectual disabilities, they suggested that key components of this kind of research include: those involved have ownership over the research questions and collaborate in the doing of the work; they have some control over process and outcomes; the outcomes further their interests and that it is most commonly associated with participatory, action or emancipatory approaches (Walmsley and Johnson 2003, 9-10). It is argued more recently (Nind 2014, 3) that the term inclusive research allows for the blurred and shifting boundaries of other research approaches which inclusive research might be associated with. As Nind (2014) argues, the term is used in different ways by different groups of people, depending on factors such as their discipline background and their national context. I am using the term 'inclusive research' in an inclusive way, applying it to a situation where a group of young people who came from a community which might be considered to be disadvantaged and appeared to be at risk of social and educational exclusion, were to be involved in leading and controlling a research project. This paper draws into focus and engages with some of the practical and conceptual challenges I faced whilst navigating the complex, problematic and shifting nature of power relations in this inclusive research project.

Background to the project

I had been working as a community based teacher in a rural area of South West England for many years. During this time, I became aware of one isolated community, which I have called Morton, which was subject to a great deal of negative discourse generally in its surrounding locality and specifically in relation to the local secondary school. Whilst working locally, I became aware that a significant number of young people from Morton appeared to be disconnecting from school. In England, school attendance of less than 80% is considered a cause for concern and school data suggested that there was concern about attendance for many of the students from Morton. At the start of this research (year one), 46% of the Morton students had an attendance of less than 80%. Once separated from school, the young people were then becoming disconnected from more than just the institution, with its collected resources and services; they were also becoming disconnected from their wider community of peers.

I recognised an insatiable desire (Deleuze 1997) in myself for a greater understanding of this situation, which appeared to be leading to exclusion from school and injustice for a group of young people I cared about. I hoped, through a research project, to develop an understanding of the way young people make connections (or not) with school and begin to develop understandings of how schools can better serve all their students. The case study set out to investigate the role school played in the lives of the young people in this community by exploring the motivations of those who went to school regularly. My explicit commitment to social justice was a key driver, perhaps *the* driver, the ultimate aim, or *telos* (Foucault 1985) of my work. As I will explain through this paper, it was this commitment to telling the story of an injustice told that moved the project through the complexity of an inclusive approach and led to a move away from participatory research; an approach that, ironically, have led to a derailment of the endeavour and a silencing of the young people involved.

Morton is in a harsh geographical locality and isolated in UK terms; it's 'such a remote out place' (Jo, student from Morton) and 'people are never meant to have lived here' (John Seccombe, Morton resident). Morton is no rural idyll (Bunce 1994; Cloke 2003). It is clearly a 'community of place' (Delanty 2003) being a large compact village, centred on a crossroads with a few outlying farms, 9 miles away from the nearest town, Riversville. There is a small primary school for children aged 5-11, with 42 children on the roll in year 1 of the project. Many of Morton's inhabitants experience poor housing and socio-economic disadvantage and access to services is a particular problem. The young people of Morton go to secondary school (with students aged 11-18) in the market town of Riversville. The secondary school is identified as a community college serving an extensive rural area, with an almost entirely white, English speaking population. It is a large secondary school with a student population, (in year 1) of around 1800. The community was undergoing 'Neighbourhood Renewal' at the time of the research, an organised programme of community regeneration in deprived areas, coordinated by a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) group convened by the local government authority, (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2005). As part of this process, which had a discourse of community engagement and participation, there was a focus on the role of local education provision in the well-being and life chances of its young people. The social and geographical context of this research, the secondary school, the market town of Riversville and the rural isolation and associated deprivation of Morton are not unique to this region. These contexts are recorded across rural areas of the UK (Shucksmith 2000) but rarely acknowledged in contemporary UK education policy.

The 'pilot phase' of the project began at the Morton Youth Club, where many of the young people knew me, because I was a local teacher. The youth workers and young people were engaged in a 'youth empowerment programme' (part of the local authority's youth work curriculum), which involved a series of activities in which young people were engaged with local and national civic and political organisations. Through this programme, the young people had met with the Morton parish council, the county council and were planning a visit to Parliament with their local MP. At an LSP meeting I attended, the youth workers in Morton said that they were aware of significant problems at school being reported by local young people. The youth workers knew me in my position as a community-based teacher and asked if I would attend a Youth Club session to engage in a discussion about school. At this session (in February of year 1), the youth workers initiated conversations about the secondary school and the young people began talking about their experiences. The young people made it clear that they were angry at what they saw as the injustices being meted out to them at school (and in

Morton) and were keen to talk to particular teachers at school including the Head teacher. Some young people wanted to talk to me in more detail and we agreed to meet in order to plan an investigation of their issues. These initial self-selected volunteers included Jo and Ivor (aged 16), Marty (aged 17), Lenny (aged 13), Mike (aged 13) and Ali (aged 15) and they became the project team. All the young people were regular school attendees. This was important, as a great deal was already known about why other young people from Morton did not go to school.

This paper continues with a series of reflections on the research planning, ethics and methodology as well as production, communication and dissemination of the project findings. Particular challenges emerged with the proposed participatory approach when the complexities of power relations within the group of young people, between me and the young people and between the project and me became obvious, in the early stages of the project. I made a sustained engagement with what I came to accept as the inappropriateness of participatory research in this context and made decisions to take an alternative approach.

Setting out with participatory research.

The case study, on which this reflection is based, set out with a commitment to investigate apparent injustices which, I argued, needed to be researched in an inclusive way to democratise the research and position the young people as participants. I determined that a participatory approach would be appropriate, whilst acknowledging that participatory research is complex and problematic territory. This research project appeared to be ideally placed to be participatory with the young people, who might be considered to be marginalised, initiating and directing (Hart 1992) the research. The group of young people wanted to talk about their experiences of Morton and their relationship with their secondary school and I was looking to carry out my doctoral research in a space which I hoped would ‘make a difference’ in some way.

My initial aim was for the young people to be involved in every element of the planning and implementation: a way to foreground the perspectives of the ‘marginalised youth’ and to identify and challenge the exclusion they were facing (Alderson 2000; Cahill 2004; Irby, Mawhinney and Thomas 2013). Using the classification by Bigby, Frawley and Ramcharan (2014a) of different approaches to inclusive research, I hoped the project, at this very early stage, was one where the young people were 'leading and controlling' the research (5). The young people had identified the issues and, together with the youth worker, had initiated the project by asking me to attend their meeting; my plan was that they would control the research process after our initial planning meeting.

At this stage, in my reports of the project, I presented arguments for the moral and ethical advantages of taking a participatory approach and that the young peoples' perspective would offer epistemological advantages (Cahill 2004; Grover 2004; Kesby 2000). Here, knowledge gained about the exclusionary structures and systems in the school would be produced and examined by those who were being excluded (Apple 1990). Participatory approaches to research are claimed to have a number of implicit advantages. Holland et al (2008) identify three dimensions to these advantages; participatory research acknowledges 'rights', it is 'right on' and it is the 'right thing to do'. They argue that participatory research: acknowledges and respects the rights of all those involved; respects the agency of individuals; is seen as being 'right on', resonating with the zeitgeist, in its recognition of the dominant discourse of political correctness; is seen as the right thing to do, with clear moral and ethical advantages over other kinds of research. Others argue for the epistemological advantages of participatory approaches which can access and give value to neglected knowledges such as those of very young children (Kesby 2000) and people with intellectual disabilities (Walmsley and Johnson 2003).

Social geographers have been documenting the use of such approaches in international community development projects since the early 1970s and participatory research has since been cited as being a key feature of work, by researchers seeking just and ethical ways to research across a wide range of social practices and issues such as disability (eg Danieli and Woodhams 2005; Lewis et al 2008), young children (eg Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Leeson

2013), marginalised youth groups (eg Batsleer 2011; Irby et al 2013), health, (eg Department of Health 2006; Abma and Broerse 2010) and community development (Carter et al 2011; Kanji and Greenwood 2001; Lilja and Bellon 2008). It is also an approach espoused and promoted by large scale international organisations such as The World Bank (2000) and UNESCO (Pant 2008). The participatory model from UNESCO has informed significant national community development activities (such as Neighbourhood Renewal) seen in the UK under the Labour Government from 1997-2010 (Lupton et al 2013). Participatory practices are used on a large and small scale, building upon 'a long standing tradition of activism which hopes to open up new spaces for decolonised knowledge production and challenge dominant hegemonic paradigms' (Cahill, Sultana and Pain 2007, 306). In a wide variety of contexts it would appear it is no longer enough to reposition the researched as *subjects*, rather than *objects* of research, the researched should be engaged as *participants* in the research (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008).

I had in mind to carry out a research project which was constituted in a fundamentally different way to the Neighbourhood Renewal process (or Neighbourhood Engineering project, as Mr Seccombe called it) which had an explicit political, participatory discourse and practice but which I considered 'tokenistic' (Hart 1992) in its approach to engaging with the inhabitants of Morton. As would be expected of any researcher working with human participants, very careful consideration was given to the ethical position taken during the research and the risks associated with doing research with this vulnerable group and community. The planning and implementing of the research project was informed by the British Education Research Association (BERA) 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (revised 2004) with its concomitant ethic of respect for persons, knowledge, democratic values, quality of educational research and academic freedom. I was an experienced teacher and worker with young people and had a long standing commitment to student involvement in co-construction of both the academic and research work I did with them. The project aims at this stage included an implicit commitment to having the research disseminated in ways that might affect those who could affect change in schools (in addition to the required doctoral submission).

There is a growing body of literature that questions some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions and foundations on which these kinds of arguments are based. Fideres (1992) and Jenks (1996) argued that the move to more participatory approaches was a response to anxiety by researchers and others about the processes they were using to research and regulate others. Critiques have taken a time to develop as perhaps there appears to be no positive opposite or counter to the idea of participatory research (Nelson and Wright 1995) with its seemingly implicit good, constructive and productive position. In their now pivotal work, ‘Participation: the new tyranny?’ Cooke and Khotari (2001) drew together a number of writers in the arena of international development and social geography prepared to voice their deep concerns about ‘participation’ and its positioning as an approach with implicit ethical, moral, methodological and epistemological advantages. Perhaps researchers have also been distracted by the ethical allure of participatory approaches (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008), in their struggles with their anxieties about the power inequalities in research to which Jenks alludes.

More contemporary critiques in other disciplines are now emerging, for example; Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) with young children; Danieli and Woodhams (2005) with disability; Jones and Stanley (2010) in their examination of collaborative research in schools; Gallagher and Wessels (2011) reflecting on collaborative practice in an arts project; Townsend (2013) and his review of peer reviewed articles on participatory activity; Ducket, Sixsmith and Kagan (2008) researching well-being in secondary schools; Tracy and Carmichael (2010), reflecting on an interdisciplinary technology enhanced learning project; Irby et al (2013) in their exploration of urban dropout prevention in US high schools. Bigby, Frawley and Ramcharan (2014b) suggest that as more explicit accounts of research practices are published, the criticisms founded on for example issues of ventriloquism and the nature of support for those involved in the research will diminish. However, my own experiences would suggest that there is a need to continue to report honestly ‘the messy realities’ which result from attempting to research inclusively so that critiques are engaged with and we are watchful for the potential to be distracted by the ethical allure of participatory research.

Struggling with participatory research.

The next stage of the project was the planning meeting with the six volunteers. Reflecting on the establishment of this meeting offers an opportunity to engage with some of those messy realities of research. I made the decision to hold the group planning meeting (and subsequent project meetings) in school rather than at the Youth Club. This decision was made for a number of reasons. The future of the Youth Club was uncertain (and sadly the youth workers were soon to be made redundant), so we could not meet there and the young people did not want to meet anywhere else in Morton after school. Guided by the ethics protocol I was operating within, together with various codes of conduct for teachers that addressed issues of practicality and the individual safety of the young people and the researcher, I made the decision to meet in school. This decision of course meant a sustained engagement with our own identities within the participatory team. Meeting in school meant that the young people and I were positioned in familiar roles as students and teacher. The explicit power relationships were familiar and although problematic, were at least transparent.

The planning meeting took place but only 3 of the 6 young people attended. The three who turned up were the eldest (Marty, Ivor and Jo) and they said we should go ahead as it was they who would be in charge of the project. This silencing of others by the three older students revealed further complications in the expression of power and control in this project. It could be argued that the young people had taken control here and in so doing, created new sites of exclusionary activity (Khotari 2001) which I considered unethical but they did not see as problematic. This position was not what I had envisaged and I found it difficult to confront, as I had positioned the young people as being in control.

It was clear from this first meeting that these three students had some serious issues with the school and really seemed to value the opportunity to talk to me about these. My diary records of this meeting reveal that the showed students raised all sorts of things they were angry about and wanted ‘sorting’. These included the terrible state of the school bus from Morton, not being allowed off site at lunch time, surveillance of students in the school toilets, poor control of behaviour in classrooms by teachers, being treated like small children, the treatment they received from public bus drivers on their way home and being labelled as ‘bad’ because they came from Morton. They did a lot of talking (and I did a lot of listening) but we made little progress on planning what I saw as the research project. The young people had an agenda that was very different from what I had in mind. They argued that they knew what the issues were and they were clear about the outcomes they hoped for. What they wanted was a way to articulate and communicate these. They said that they wanted to talk to some teachers and the Head teacher about the issues they saw as injustices and wanted what they saw as problems resolved immediately. My diary notes record how struck I was by the articulate and passionate nature of the expressions made by the young people as they talked of their experiences.

At this stage, I began to question my own motivations and the appropriateness of my approach. The young people wanted action quickly but the research planning process needed time. A significant amount of time had passed since the first meeting at the Youth Club (February) and the planning meeting (March), as it had taken time to find a mutually agreeable a date and venue. Notes in my research diaries, interim reports and from tutorials, record periods of reflexivity when went to meetings with my supervisor, or to speak at events with colleagues about the project, where I stepped away from the immediacy of the project arena. The records of these reflective interludes indicate that I had begun to acknowledge that it was my agenda that was driving the project and not the young people’s. It was me that wanted a participatory project with young people initiating and controlling the research; they wanted action. In his early, highly critical response to the rise of PAR (Participatory Action Research)

Fideres, (1992) states that the process should be reframed as Participatory Action, arguing that this is a more honest and appropriate position to take.

At this first planning meeting with Jo, Ivor and Marty, we agreed to set up a meeting with the Head teacher, at which they could voice their concerns. I suggested it might be best to base the arguments they were going to present to the Head teacher on data we could collect from their peers in Morton. They considered agreeing to this but identified another problem, time. These older students were all due to leave school later that year. Setting up any kind of research takes time but inclusive research needs even more time for all the negotiation, being and agreeing together. I had three years to complete my study but the oldest students did not have this amount of time and were keen for an immediate resolution of their issues. We agreed that a meeting would be set up for Marty, Ivor and Jo to meet with the Head teacher and that I would do the ‘research’ with the younger students. A meeting date in April was agreed by these three older students and with the Head teacher for a discussion of their issues and they asked me to accompany them. However, none of the young people turned up for the meeting. Consequently, I used the opportunity to talk with the Head teacher by myself. Attempts to reschedule the meeting were then thwarted by a period of significant difficulty and instability at the school, which resulted in the departure of the Head teacher and a significant section of the senior management. Marty, Ivor and Jo then left school for ‘study leave’ in May.

In the mean time, I set up a planning meeting with the younger members of the initial group of volunteers: Lenny, Mike and Ali. Only Lenny and Mike turned up. At this meeting, Lenny and Mike agreed with each other and then with me that they wanted to talk to me and have their experiences of school and living in Morton recorded. Like the older young people, Lenny and Mike just seemed to want to talk. It seemed clear to me, by this stage, that the young people wanted someone to listen to them and to take seriously (Giroux 2005) what they had to say. They had so much experience of what they saw as the problems they were facing, they did not need to ‘explore’ any further. It was if they did not see the need for any further ‘calculus of emiseration’ (Slee 2001, 174); they wanted others to listen and action to result, not further research.

The problems of participation and power

Reflections in my research diary record my concerns that the participatory approach I had taken seemed to be reinforcing rather than challenging hierarchical power relations between the researcher and the young people (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Noyes 2005) and exposing new ones. Some writers have warned researchers about the unexpected ways in which individuals and groups can subvert and confuse patterns of control in research projects. For example Schafer and Yarwood (2008) show how complex power relations between groups of students in a school involved in a research project had unexpected and damaging consequences. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) identify projects where they have been involved in with young children and the control was clearly not where they expected it to be. Tracy and Carmichael (2010) and Gallagher and Wessels (2011) explore the complexities of power relationships in interdisciplinary and international participatory projects, the latter arguing that participatory approaches can become an kind of colonising coercion and stress the importance for researchers to be aware of and to engage with ‘the hidden pull to colonisation and reification’ (242). Ruddock and Fielding, in their work on schools warn us of the ‘perils in the popularity’ (Ruddock and Fielding 2006, 223) of voice and participation work.

I had been determined to avoid the perils of the popularity but had to acknowledge that continuing to attempt to include young people in the ‘research’ but not fulfilling their hopes, might expose, alienate and reinforce positions of power and difference between them, the school and myself. Perhaps also, ‘despite rhetoric of agency the reality is that students remain objects of elite adult plans’ (Gunter and Thompson 2007, 181). Now I was aware of the colonisation of the project by myself as the researcher, I doubted the appropriateness of the participatory approach. I eventually decided a truly participatory project was inappropriate I acknowledged that the insidious nature of power relations in systems and structures such as schools and communities as well as in research are complex and fluid and defy resolution and perhaps participatory research can never be achieved in places like schools (Arnot and Reay 2007; Batsleer 2011). In attempting to disturb the power relations in research through 'participation', new less obvious inequalities were being created. I could not reconcile ethically, the theory and the practice I had hoped for, with the realities of carrying out the research.

In their recent review of peer reviewed literature on inclusive research in the UK and Australia (where the term inclusive research is used in the same way), Bigby et al (2014a) argue that the demands of collaborative inclusive research, where all who are taking part have different and shared purposes and are equally valued (the epitome of inclusive research in their view) does place extraordinary demands on those taking part and may 'pose unique ethical challenges researchers find difficult and some may not be willing or able to manage' (9). I would argue that while research groups are right to engage with the challenges they should also be aware of being drawn into inclusive approaches by the ethical allure of the possibility for redistribution of power in research processes and then in the ensuing complexity, losing sight of other possible approaches to the research that may be more appropriate.

Arguments that suggest that power can be shifted, through participatory research, from individuals such as those who may have assumed control over a research project, are problematic (Pain and Frances 2003). Researchers using participatory approaches may argue that they are making efforts to challenge and disrupt the traditional power structures but power relations in any social situation are myriad, complex, shifting and not transparent (Khotari 2001). Foucault (1977) argues that power lies in acts rather than people. Therefore, from a Foucauldian perspective, these shifting, relational power structures ensure that any attempt to disrupt them will only add further complexity or shift the complexity into ways that are harder to identify.

This research was driven by two key motivations: the desire to further understanding of the apparent injustice being experienced by the young people of Morton at their secondary school and my need to complete my doctoral study. It might be argued that a project, in which I had such a personal stake in the reported outcomes, did not stand a chance of being truly participatory. However, it is argued here, that for any researcher attached in some way to an academic institution or system, funding body, charity or political group, there will be implicit expectations about the impact of resulting publications. This will, by default, impact implicitly or explicitly the on shape the project takes. It is important to remind ourselves here that there are many different ways to approach research, which explicitly sets out to investigate issues of social injustice with the intention of drawing attention to and possibly resolving these injustices. For me, it was important to acknowledge that a participatory approach was not appropriate for this project.

Moving on from participatory research

Partly as a response to a period of reflection and the difficulties I was facing, along with other serendipitous events of the kind that happen in real life/research, I began to reposition my methodology. My own academic and social justice agendas were still driving the research. These had an implicit commitment to publish findings that might inform the development of more inclusive schools; fulfilling this commitment, required data, analysis, publication and dissemination. I had become acutely aware of the obvious dangers in producing research that confirms the view of the world by powerful groups such as the ones the researcher is associated with by default (Mirza 1997). I made the decision to adapt my approach and underpin these changes using the conceptual framework of Foucault's 'ethical project'.

Foucault's framework of ethics focuses on 'the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to have his own mode of being' (Foucault 1987, 30). Ethical work as practice has a 'readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought …a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental' (Foucault 1988, 132). 'Ethics should focus on the work of the self on the self…the self taking itself as a work to be accomplished' (Foucault 1997, 263). This requires constant and conscious reflection and action on ourselves and the world we are in. Using this framework, I was constantly made aware of the potential effects my own practice and presence in the research had on the process and any outcomes. This ethical project framework seemed to resonate with my own growing awareness of the exclusionary impacts of my role as a researcher and the complexities of participatory research that were exposing, reinforcing and reducing the transparency of complex power structures.

In her work on inclusion as an ethical project, Allan (2005) translates the four elements of Foucault's ethical practice into a form which can be used can be used as 'method' and here I set these four elements into the context of my own work.

1. *Determination of the ethical substance*: in the research I am reflecting on here, this involved identification in myself, the things that need to be worked on which encouraged acknowledgement of my own role in creating exclusionary pressures.

2. *The mode of subjection*: the ways in which individuals live within the 'rules'. The exclusionary nature of 'rules', structures and systems in and around a community and a school were scrutinized in this research.

3. *Self-practice or ethical work*: the way in which an individual can change the way they live. Key activities in ethical work are deconstruction, criticism and reflexivity. Through my own process of deconstruction, critique and reflexivity, I hoped to have an alternative perspective, to 'make strange' the familiar, to explore new ways of seeing and being.

4. The ultimate goal of ethical work, Foucault calls the *telos*: the telos of this project was social justice for the young people subject to the exclusionary forces in and around Morton and their secondary school.

Allan argues that the ethical project does not have an emancipatory goal or promise of rescue to grounds of certainty (Stronach and Maclure 1997), freedom or empowerment, so avoids involvement in emancipatory politics (Allan 2005). Instead, it offers individual researchers the chance to experience ‘the self as agent’ (Warren 1988, 138). Using this ethical framework to inform the development of the project, it became a work of listening (Mazzei 2007). This offered a space to really listen and take seriously (Giroux 2005) what the young people had to say, whilst acknowledging that it was ultimately the researcher’s interpretation that was recorded. It was here, through listening and ‘a readiness to find out what surrounds us strange and odd’ (Foucault 1988, 132) that key insights into the exclusionary school structures and systems and the way young people were making connections (or not) with school were found. With this simpler and perhaps more honest approach, the data derived from listening to the young people from Morton became key.

Using the modified research approach, informed by the ethical project framework, I now saw myself (and perhaps the young people saw me) as ‘an agent of change’. Here I was examining the impact of my own practices as a researcher and a teacher whilst also finding out about the practices at the school from listening to the Morton group. Consequently, at the second planning meeting with Lenny and Mike, it was agreed we would set up a series of conversations where I would ask the young people from Morton about their lived experiences of school and then report the findings to the young people and to the school managers. All the six volunteers agreed to this and we agreed I would meet with them on their own or in pairs or groups, as they preferred. I met with the three older students again before they left school in the June of year 1 and they did a week of recording on an audio diary, something they had heard researchers do. I continued conversations with the younger students, Lenny, Mike and Ali, over a second school year, again mostly on their own, although Mike and Lenny came and talked together sometimes; they said they did not want to do audio diaries. I recorded and transcribed all the many conversations with the young people that took place in this sustained engagement over the two years. All recordings from the planning meetings and audio diaries were also transcribed.

This second year was a very difficult time for the school, operating with an acting Head teacher and reduced management group. At the end of year two, the young people decided they had talked enough (and no longer wanted to talk to the new school managers, who they did not know). They wanted their stories of school to be reported in Morton and asked me to do this. The Youth Club had closed and the LSP meetings had ceased by this time, so we agreed I would send a summary to the Morton Parish Council to be read at a meeting. We also agreed that the summary report would be sent to the new Head teacher of Riversville College. None of the young people wanted to read anything I produced but all six young people thanked me for listening.

Reporting participatory research: the problem of representation

There are two particular problems faced when reporting research that sets out which set out to challenge traditional power relationships: the problem of representation and the problem of speaking for others. Most research will have begun with an expectation that others not involved directly in the work, should hear about any findings. Any oral or written reports of the research activity that involves people will implicitly require representation. When we acknowledge, that any act of representation is performative, not just descriptive (Alcoff 1991), what emerges is a creation that can never coincide with the subject it claims to represent (Coffey 1996).

It is generally understood that for a research project to have an impact, the findings need to be disseminated effectively. Effective communication of research findings is important if the message is to be heard by those the researchers hope to influence; funding bodies, decision makers, policy writers, other researchers and students working in a similar area of study or perhaps a local community of place or of practice. Whatever the target audience, the findings need to be communicated by those who have done the research to those who will listen or to those who have the power to change things or to make things happen.

When these research projects include researchers connected to academic institutions (and other organisations operating in the global knowledge market place) there are additional factors to consider. The domination of current forms of reporting and representation used by academic structures, such as journal articles and books, is a challenge to the development of alternative forms of representation for projects in academic contexts. In academic institutions, there are particular complex (and sometimes opaque) systems and structures resulting from the demands of academic organisation, funding, research and publication. The requirements of academic publishing and ethical approval systems continue to dominate the direction research projects take and the outputs of academic staff involved.

If participatory research is going to be able to disrupt power relationships (Pain and Francis 2003), the role and practice of all those involved in this kind of research, including academics must be challenged. However, a consequence of this may be an increase in complexity and decrease in transparency of roles of those involved in the research that may mask new and troubling power relationships in the practice and reporting of research. Cooke and Khotari (2001) identify, in their area of participatory development work, that 'any authority and the ability to have one's position taken seriously… appear to be closely related to the power to publish' (2).

All research work, including communication of the project findings is a political act. The ways in which people get involved in a participatory research project, or to speak, write or perform as part of a project and its dissemination activities, emerge from a complex web of power relations. Those involved in the acts of dissemination will probably be the more 'discursively privileged' (Alcoff 1991). Alcoff (1991) argues that 'rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation and sub ordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of and who listens are the result, as well as an act, of political struggle' (15). Therefore, representation in a discursive context such as communication of the findings of a project is a political act. This means that the construction of contributions to any communications about a project is one of the expressions of the implicit and explicit power structures within the project.

Mus (2010) argues that a ‘crisis of representation’ (Marcus and Fischer 1986) has led to general fear and confusion in the methodology and reporting of social qualitative research (see for example the engagement with representation of ‘voice’ in post qualitative by writers such as Mazzei, Maclure, St Pierre and Jackson in the special edition of *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (2013), Volume 26, number 6). This confusion, I argue, is leading to a lack of clarity and transparency in some research situations that attempt to engage with and mediate issues of representation in research activity, such as those that take a participatory research approach.

Participatory and other inclusive ways of working in research suggest a ‘retreat’ of the instigators of the activity from dominant positions, in order for ‘others’ to share control of the research. This retreat, it is argued, is necessary in order to give space for others to contribute and ‘take ownership’ of the research. Alcoff (1991) and Spivak (1988) argue that in order to be in a position to retreat, the individual must have been in a position of power. Alcoff (1991) argues that an apparent retreat of this kind ‘is based on a metaphysical illusion, and often effects only an obscuring of the intellectual’s power’ (24). Spivak (1988) argues that suggesting there is a diminution in the power of the ‘leader’ by this process of stepping back, is a dishonesty. This position of dishonesty muddies the water and reduces the transparency through which the activities of the research are viewed. Khotari (2001) presents this muddling of power relations, when researchers assume that they ‘stepping back’ from a position of authority, as a paradox; the more participatory the activity, perhaps the less transparent it becomes.

Some of those engaged with the ‘troubling’ or problematisation of voice work (eg Hinterberger 2007; Maclure 2009; Mazzei 2007) argue there are no justifications for speaking for others. However, Alcoff (1991) argues that with careful attention, it is possible, arguing that the impetus for the ‘discursively privileged’ to speak must be carefully analysed and in many cases (certainly for academics) fought against (24) before proceeding. We can only make the decision to ‘move over’ and retreat from a position of power. Speaking for others is an act, rather than an abdication, of privilege. As well as having this in mind, reporters should also interrogate the bearing of their location and context on what is being said and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in (25). Alcoff asks that this should not done through authors writing autobiographical disclaimers about themselves, which attempt to explain their individual actions, but through constructing with others, looking for the possible connections between our locations, contexts and our words. As part of the speaker carrying accountability and responsibility for what is said, the speaker for others must not only look at the content of the report but also to where those words will go and what they will do there.

It is argued by those leading developments in doing research inclusively (eg Nind 2014) that a way to manage the reporting of inclusive research and include all those who have taken part is to produce varied and multiple outputs, reflecting the multiple purposes of the group members (Bigby et al 2014a; Nind 2009). There are some exciting developments in the reporting and dissemination of participatory research, with a multiplicity of forms of such as performance, song, poetry and art installations (eg Batsleer 2011). Judging quality of inclusive research (Nind and Vinha 2012) and the effectiveness of its dissemination is a challenge to be faced. The resulting ‘reports’ from the research in whatever format is selected, written report, films, information campaigns, group presentations or drama and music productions, requires representation of the individuals involved by those putting the message together and disseminating it. The particular audience may determine the medium and style of the communications but the message must be designed to be heard.

This multiplicity offers for the possibility for different kinds of spaces to disseminate research findings. These might include non-accessible spaces , which have been negotiated and agreed with the whole group, independent of the pressure of ‘nothing about us without us’ (Walmsley and Johnson 2003, 15) in which academic activity can take place. As reports of inclusive research continue to emerge it will be interesting to see how diverse the outputs become, the relative values placed on the quality of these and which members of the collaborative research groups have control of which outputs. My own experiences would suggest this is an area of great challenge for researchers interested in shifting power relationships in research.

Reporting the findings of this project.

Reporting the findings that resulted from this study proved to be very challenging, as the stories the young people shared about their experiences of school revealed some deeply disturbing exclusionary practice and discourses at the school. Using the framework of the ethical project to guide my own practice, I managed the reporting and dissemination process very carefully, acknowledging the power of this act. I wanted to ensure the messages from the young people were reported, but did not expose the school or the community.

The overwhelming sense gained from listening to the young people was that school is seen as primarily a social place, a place for connections and relationships, although these connections may not always be beneficial (almost all the young people involved in this study were in trouble at school for their behaviour). The intensity of the students' social relations seem to spill over into classroom situations that then emerge as problem behaviour, fights etc. The data collected from listening to the young people, show that their in-school networks of friends were more diverse than their out-of-school networks. It also showed how important school is for them as a place to make and be with friends. The intensity of the social encounters of students in schools, with their powerful rules that govern group life, some of which can result in social cruelty and exclusion ,is well documented (Thompson 2001) . I argue that stories from the young people of Morton show that awareness of the importance of 'the social' is essential in developing understandings of inclusion and exclusion in schools. What the young people had to say, suggested that there was an urgent need to explicitly acknowledge and accommodate pedagogically and spatially (Lahelma 2002), the social element of their school life; this appeared to be key to the problems they were experiencing with school.

There were many changes in the school and community between the data collection period and publication of the report. With all these local changes, the data collected from the Morton young people could be seen to document the past and the findings to inform the future. This space, between the past and the future was then envisioned as offering ‘spaces in between’ (Stronach 1996) for mutual engagement in change. Here, in these spaces, it was hoped that all members of the school community could work together in the envisioning of a more human centred school (Fielding 2007). By the time reports of this project were published (in year three), all the young people involved directly in this project had left school. I met up with the participants after the project had finished and I was able to tell them that the research reports and I were being consulted by the new Head teacher, in her endeavours to make the school a more inclusive and connected place to be.

Final Reflections

This paper presents reflection on my experience of working in the paradox of ‘participation’ that emerged in this case study. Beginning with a participatory approach seemed highly appropriate to the context and aims of the research, but the contingent complexities and resulting struggles with power and transparency, led to ethical dilemmas that proved irreconcilable for me. A repositioning of the approach to one informed by Foucauldian ethics meant I, as the researcher was positioned as an agent of change. This resulted in its own dilemmas when it came to publishing and disseminating findings. An academic paper in an erudite journal is not an easy place for quiet voices to be heard themselves, so others use spaces like these to write and speak for those quieter voices who want to have their stories told and herein lay one of the dilemmas. There are clearly problems with representation and speaking for or about others. Sometimes, where there were clearly social injustices that need to be spoken of, it is argued that it is appropriate for the discursively privileged to take responsibility for speaking for others (Alcoff 1991) or to others (Spivak 1988). After having listened to the young people from Morton in a deep and sustained way during this research, my writing of this paper and other reports I have written gives a chance for them to be heard in places where what they had to say might make a difference. Alcoff (1991) reminds us that retreating can only be done from a position of power. Retreating from my position of power and not speaking about the exclusion of the young people from Morton, would deny them an opportunity to have the stories of their injustices told in spaces where their own voices may struggle to be heard.

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