Researching 'with', not 'on': engaging marginalised learners in the research process

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Abstract

This paper discusses practical and methodological issues arising from a case study exploring the hopes, aspirations and learning identities of 3 groups of students undertaking low level broad vocational programmes in 2 English General Further Education (FE) colleges. Working within a Social Justice theoretical framework the paper outlines the participative approach which was adopted as part of the research process from the initial development of interview questions to the early data analysis. It explores the advantages and limitations of the approach in the context of the broader methodology and the social justice theoretical framework arguing that, despite the intention to collaborate with the participants, the ultimate control over the study was vested in the researcher, raising questions around the nature and extent of empowerment through the medium of research.

The paper draws two key conclusions. In social justice terms, the young people's contribution was limited by their lack of previous experience of any type of research and, to some extent, by difficulty with the written word. Despite this, the participative approach was effective in demonstrating value and respect for the young participants and provided an opportunity for them to make their voices heard from beyond the model of disadvantage and disengagement in which government policy seeks to confine them. Further, in purely methodological terms, the approach provided insights which could not have been obtained by 'researching on', suggesting that it provides a useful means of exploring the lives and identities of marginalised youth.

Key Words

Introduction

The research project discussed in this paper explored the aspirations and learning identities of young people undertaking level 1 programmes post-16. The study, which acknowledged the low social value placed on these young people, sought to understand how they perceived the reality of their lives, and how they contextualised their learning programme as a part of that life. Working from a social justice perspective, the study aimed to enable these marginalised young people to have their voices heard. In doing so I utilised a participatory and inclusive approach. The practice of inclusive research is limited, but has its roots in the disabled people's movements (Björnsdóttir and Svensdóttir 2008). Kellett (2010:49) also advocates a participatory approach in research with children. This paper explores some of the practical and methodological issues which arose utilising such an approach with young people who live, work and learn on the margins.

Level 1 is the lowest mainstream provision available in England in a post-16 context, and is aimed at 'disaffected' and 'disengaged' young people, who have attained very poor outcomes in the General Certificate of Education (GCSE) national 16+ examinations. Many of those who participate in level 1 programmes do so in a transitory fashion. The collapse of the youth labour market means that those with few or no credentials experience a school to work transition – a significant phase in the formation of identity (Warin, 2010:46) – characterised by a relentless 'churn' between low level education programmes, low, pay low skill work and being Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). This leads to an extended period of dependency on parents, and an associated delay in moving on to the activities and identities, such as leaving home and starting work, traditionally associated with adulthood (Macdonald and Marsh 2005:32). Delayed formation of adult identities has been argued by Côté (2005:223) to have a significant impact on young peoples' ability to form global and universalistic rather than local and parochial identities, something which has serious economic implications in terms of their ability to participate in the global economy.

Context

The two participating institutions were Woodlands College and Huntsman College. Woodlands is located in Midport in the English midlands and Huntsman in Townsville in the north of England. Though geographically distant from one another, both are

located in areas which suffered significantly from the industrial decline of the late 20th Century. Both serve areas of considerable disadvantage according to government measures (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007). Educational achievement according to the government benchmark of 5 GCSE grades at A*-C including English and Maths, is below the national average of 46% (2007 data) in both towns, but much higher in Townsville (39%) than in Midport (33%).

All those participants who progressed from mainstream education (43/48) had experienced disrupted education for reasons as diverse as being 'looked after' by their local authority; arriving in the UK as an asylum seeker; suspension and exclusion from school; involvement in petty crime; physical disability and caring responsibilities. Like those in Wellington and Cole's research (2004:101/102) the young people who participated in this study were a marginalised group of learners with complex learning needs, often arising from chaotic lives and disrupted home backgrounds. The 5/48 participants who had progressed from Special Needs education had similar social problems to their mainstream peers, but faced additional challenges associated with both disability and their education outside the mainstream. Despite their individual challenges, all the young people were articulate and keen to achieve their occupational aspirations, which were mainly associated with technical and professional roles such as nursing. Few, however, recognised the true extent of their potential transition. Despite government rhetoric which implies that low level skills programmes will lead to high pay, high skill work, achieving a degree from a starting point of level 1 would entail a transition of a minimum of seven years (four in FE and three in Higher Education (HE)), and achievement of a level 3 apprenticeship five years. It would take a two year transition just to achieve the Government's stated minimum level of credential for employability (DfES, 2003b; 2005).

Woodlands College offered an in-house level 1 programme developed by college staff. This consisted of multiple short courses with individual accreditation supported by Basic Skills in literacy and numeracy and one day a week working towards a limited choice of National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) units which might eventually contribute to a full award. As such, it was comparable in content to contemporary employability programmes. At Huntsman College the young people were pursuing nationally accredited Foundation GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification

level 1) awards. These programmes, since withdrawn nationally, were heavily criticised for their emphasis on socialising young people into particular forms of low pay, low skill work (Ainley, 1991:103; Helsby *et al*, 1998:74; Bathmaker, 2001) and for their limited exchange value in the labour market (Keep, 2009; Atkins, 2010). Despite these critiques, these forms of socialisation persist in contemporary employability and low level broad vocational programmes in response to the deficit model utilised by policy makers to describe those who are perceived to lack particular (ill-defined) skills and attributes.

Researching with – a conceptual framework

The wish to research 'with' and not 'on' arose from moral and ethical concerns about social justice and finding a means by which the voices of a particular marginalised group might be heard. Level 1 learners are located at the bottom of a hierarchy of low status vocational programmes in low status institutions which form part of a broader system in which vocational education is held in lower esteem than academic education. In addition to their educational positioning, these young people are also located in a deficit model in terms of the discourse of underachievement surrounding them. This discourse, based on uncritical stereotypes of marginalised youth, effectively justifies and re-inforces a public and policy perception that they have homogenous learning and attitudinal deficits as well as homogenous needs. This discourse led me to question how it felt to be positioned and regarded in this way, and to consider ways in which it might be possible to demonstrate value and respect for these young people as individuals. Inevitably, this also meant addressing issues of power and control as well as giving consideration to ways in which the young peoples' voices might be heard. Using a more traditional, less participative methodology risked replicating existing power relationships, thus silencing the voices of the young participants something which would reduce their importance as individuals (Dowse, 2009:150). A reflexive and participative approach, similar to that advocated by Dowse, was adopted in the research, and a narrative approach, drawing heavily on raw data and contextualised within a particular educational context, was utilised in the final report. These approaches sought to address concerns around power, control, and the use of voice.

 The use of voice is not a simple approach to empowerment, since it can, as Fine (1992; 1994) and Usher (2000:34) have warned, have the paradoxical effect of 'distorting and controlling'. Addressing the 'multi-layered problem of voice' (Lincoln and Guba 2000:183) also, therefore, involves responding to these issues in a reflexive way and constituting a 'moral voice' (Usher, 2000:34) in the narrative of the study. It's use also raises questions, addressed to some extent by Fine *et al* (2000:120) about how theorists can both respect the narratives of their participants, whilst placing them within a social and historical context and yet 'not collude' with the social scientific fixation with the working class?   As Fine *et al* also acknowledge, there are no easy answers.

In addition to these moral and ethical concerns, there were questions about the validity of empirical research in which the interpretation of data is exclusively that of the researcher but is represented as the 'truth' about a particular group and used to 'create meanings and produce identities' (Usher 2000:26) which the individuals concerned may not regard as 'truth'. This is particularly the case where research participants are from traditionally oppressed groups and where researchers make specific gendered or class based interpretations of the research process and data. Involvement of the young participants in the process was a key strategy is addressing these concerns.

Level 1 students form a stigmatized and oppressed group. They are structurally and institutionally constrained in terms of social class and a host of other exclusionary characteristics, as well as by perceived academic ability determined by level of credential. This final characteristic determines that they will follow an educational path which will give them qualitatively different employment outcomes to their higher performing peers (Avis, 2008; Howieson and Ianelli, 2008:285). The young people who participated in this research exhibited different combinations of these characteristics, reflecting individual, multi-faceted examples of multiple oppressions which resulted in exclusion from mainstream society.

Fine (1994:31) has argued that intellectuals carry a responsibility to engage with struggles for democracy and justice. Similarly, Griffiths (1998:114/115) outlines different forms of collaborative relationship (i.e. researching with, not on), of 'joint theorizing and action' within the context of the power of agency and argues that

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such relationships are a means for developing empowerment, and ultimately social justice, a view supported by Bland and Atweh (2007:346). The participatory approach developed in this research has been, in part, an attempt to respond to these arguments and to 'make the invisible visible' (Dagley 2004:613). This involved a re-thinking of the relationship with the participants in the research, and consideration of ways in which a more collaborative and empowering relationship could be engendered, such as developing the more dialogical process advocated by Gitlin and Russell (1994:184) , which is argued by Fielding (2004:306) to have considerable promise for transformation. However, this re-thinking of the relationship with participants also had to recognise the potential constraints imposed by working with a group of young people with no previous experience and limited understanding of research processes.

Research Context

Most of the 48 students who participated in the study had progressed to their course from school. However, consistent with work by Hodkinson (1996; 1998) and Hodkinson *et al* (1996) these young people had 'confining' trajectories which were 'constrained within the parameters of their social group' (Salisbury and Jephcote 2008:151). Most of the students were aged 16 or 17 though a few were older. The eldest, James, had progressed from special needs provision and was aged 22 at the time of interview.

The students formed four groups from the two colleges. Access was initially negotiated with the College Principals. Heads of Department and Programme Leaders with responsibility for Level 1 students subsequently acted as 'gatekeepers'. The programme leaders also agreed to participate in the study: they were subsequently observed teaching and interviewed as well as providing considerable documentary evidence during the academic year.

Although the study involved the participation of teachers, the focus of the collaboration was with the student participants. For this reason, the research process was evaluated and discussed with them at each stage as an ongoing means of developing inclusive strategies for collaboration from initial planning to final data analysis. Data collection methods included interviews, participant observation and examination of documentary records. Other data, much acquired by serendipity

rather than design included some written data from students as well as samples of their college work, much of which reflected lives and cultures. This was volunteered by the students and contributed to the final analysis.

Early Participation

The first step in developing a research process which was as dialogical and participative as possible was to involve some of the participants in the development of the research instruments and process. A Group of level 1 students from Woodlands College participated in the development activity. This was a pragmatic decision, as access to Huntsman College was still under negotiation. For internal, institutional reasons, this group did not subsequently participate in the study, although other level 1 students from the same institution did.

In addition to the moral and ethical reasons for this participation, discussed above, methodologically it ensured that the investigation was grounded in the reality of the participants' lives, avoiding the risk of asking 'Catholic questions of a Methodist audience' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000:175). This is a significant risk in any exploration of identity, a concept which is 'partial, contested, and, at times, contradictory' (Tierney, 2000:547) as well as being individual, and influenced by a significant range of life experiences (which may be far removed from those of the researcher) as well as characteristics such as gender, race and class. Therefore, the starting point for the study was to consider what was important to the young people and which aspects of their lives they considered should be investigated. This involved asking the young people questions such as *what do I need to ask you to find out about your lives and what is important to you? What sort of things could we do together that would help me to understand your lives?*

These questions were explored with group A using a simplified version of the model of 'arenas of action and centres of choice' proposed by Ball *et al* (2000:148) which provides a framework for understanding the transition experiences of young people. The model was provided in pictorial form and explained to the group who were asked to use the three headings (associated with family, work and education and leisure) to generate ideas about the things that were important to them. The activity was undertaken using flip charts and pens, media with which they were familiar. The

group of 16 students was subdivided into 4 small groups and to ensure the students felt comfortable with the process, the groups were self selected.

Although there was a difference in emphasis in the themes which arose from the students' work all ascribed importance to broadly similar areas. Two sub groups placed significant emphasis on money as well as their college course.

A third group (3 females, 2 males) engaged in considerable debate and was most productive in terms of ideas and outcomes. These young people had a wider range of important issues to share all of which suggested a greater concern with the family and leisure activities than their course, and may have reflected the gender split within the group: all came from traditional working class backgrounds with fixed gender roles.

Finally, a group of three male British Asian students gave responses which reflected concern with the future and eventual employment; their emphasis on the course was in terms of how it might help to facilitate them achieving their ambitions: for example, by setting up or working in 'a good business'. The questions and ideas arising from this activity subsequently generated the questions for the student interview schedule and the interview schedule used with tutors as well as providing themes for the initial data analysis. At this early stage comparison of the questions and ideas reflected common themes consistent with Cote's (2005:223) suggestion that career choice and lifestyle preferences are fundamental to adult identity formation. However, there were also significant gender and racial differences in the identification of 'important' which would need further exploration at the data analysis stage.

Developing the process, facilitating involvement

Once the students' interview schedule had been completed, an introductory meeting was held with each of the student groups to discuss the study and invite them to participate in it. A series of 5 meetings were held with each group over the course of one academic year and involved a range of data collection activities and meetings for feedback and discussion.

The verbal explanations about the study which were given in an initial meeting with each group and were supplemented by an A4 handout which explained the purpose of the research, how the students might participate, and provided an ethical framework for the research which drew on the BERA (2004) guidance. This handout, as with others produced at different stages of the study, was produced on a single side of A4 paper. Language was checked for readability and the handout made use of illustrations and white space in order to ensure that it was accessible to all members of the student group as some students had English as a second language and most had very low levels of functional literacy. It also included contact details in case any student had questions or concerns they wished to raise at any time and students were encouraged to use them to comment on, and criticise, the process as it evolved.

During the second visit small group interviews took place with those young people who had agreed to participate in this form of data collection. Groups for interview self-selected and largely consisted of friendship groups. A number of writers have discussed the relative advantages and disadvantages of group interviews – (e.g. Wellington 2000:80/81; Fontana and Frey 2000:652 and Denscombe 1998:114/115), and it is clear that the issues around this approach are very different to those which should be considered in the context of individual interviews. In the context of this study, it was important to establish a collaborative working relationship with all the participants, and to minimise any constraints arising from perceived or actual power dynamics. Madriz (2000:838) has suggested that 'In the context of individual interviews, there is the potential to reproduce the power relationships between the researcher and the participants'. Whilst this makes a strong case for the use of groups, such approaches can be problematic, particularly in terms of interference with individual expression or domination of the group by one individual. Taking into account the potential risks and advantages of both types of interview, I chose to offer students a choice between participating in a group or individual interview. This approach demonstrated respect for individuals and placed a clear and explicit value on their opinion as well as ensuring that they were empowered to take some control of the process; it also minimised any potential inhibition related to power dynamics or an unfamiliar social situation.

31 of the 48 participants agreed to be interviewed. The remaining 17 participated in other data gathering activities but declined to be interviewed; most of those who declined were from Woodlands College. Two significant factors may have influenced students' willingness to participate in the interview process. The most pragmatic of these was timing. At Huntsman College, the teaching staff facilitated students to leave class during lessons to be interviewed. At Woodlands College, due to the constraints of imminent assessment deadlines, the interviews took place during students' break times. None of the young people had any intrinsic motive to participate; thus it seems likely that those who could miss lesson time to do so may have been more willing participants than those who would miss break times.

A second influencing factor may have been the way in which I was introduced to the young people by their tutors which varied between the two institutions. At Woodlands College I was introduced as 'a researcher from the University', a status which distanced me from the young people I hoped to work with. In contrast, at Huntsman College I was introduced more informally, as a person who had been a college lecturer and was now hoping that students would help with some research. The different nature of the introductions reflected the different ethos in each college, and, to an extent, 'set the scene' for the relationships which were built with each group of young people. At an interpersonal level, it seems possible that the more informal approach used at Huntsman College contributed to a greater willingness on behalf of those learners to contribute to all aspects of the study.

The small group interviews, which were recorded and later transcribed, were carried out during the course of an academic year. A number of factors, including external examinations and Government Inspection, influenced when they could take place. As a result of this, students were interviewed at different times during the academic year, something which potentially influenced their responses. Follow up interviews conducted towards the end of the year acknowledged that identities and aspirations might change and develop over time, and provided a further opportunity to confirm the emerging themes of the study.

At the visit following interview, each participant was given two copies of their transcript, one to keep and one to annotate if they wished. Most students chose to do this in the groups in which they had been interviewed. They made only minor

amendments, such as to the names of the schools they had attended, but no changes to content. This may indicate satisfaction with the integrity of the data they had contributed, but seems more likely to have been a reflection of the fact that they were confused by the purpose of the activity, perceiving it as repetitive and unnecessary.

Additional data were gathered using participant observation during sessions in college. This activity was carried out with all three groups, using a 'stream of consciousness' approach. The level of researcher participation was dictated largely by the tutor on each occasion. During the first session, at Woodland's College, it was only possible to sit and take notes. At Huntsman College, during an observation of the GNVQ Foundation IT group, there was some interaction with both students and tutor. During the final observation at Huntsman College with the Health and Social Care group the tutor and students asked for me to contribute to the discussions during the lesson. During the two final observations, students read and commented on the field notes I was making as I wrote, as well as contributing their own opinions about what was happening in the class (rather than participating in learning activities).Their comments were informal and verbal and were added to the field notes.

Celebrity Lifestyles and Fantasy Futures

At this point in the fieldwork, a debate with participants about anonymisation was instrumental in my suggestion that they chose their own pseudonym. The response to this was interesting, and a clear gender difference was reflected. Most male students found the process amusing, and offered 'joke' names, most of which were related to aspects of perceived masculinity, such as sexual prowess. A majority of the female students chose the names of contemporary 'celebrities' and there was a relationship between these choices, which appeared rooted in notions of wealth, fame and celebrity, and the aspirations expressed by the students during interview. A fascination with celebrity culture was evident across both genders and all ethnic groups and appeared to be related to a hope that one day they might experience a sudden transformation which would lead to a celebrity lifestyle. Preoccupation with celebrity lifestyle formed a significant aspect of the young peoples' leisure activity in terms of their interest in popular culture and the lifestyle of celebrities such as the Beckhams. As well as engaging with media reports on individual celebrities they also

watched a range of popular competition programmes on television in which the winner received significant cash rewards and instant fame such as 'Big Brother' or 'X Factor'. The preoccupation with celebrity reflected the concept of 'fantasy futures' or belief in sudden transformation described by Ball *et al* (1999:214) and also identified in a study of NEET young people in Wales (TES 2006). Most young people did, however, acknowledge the likelihood of a more mundane future. For example, Catherine (Level 1, Woodlands) wanted to be a dress designer but recognised that she was more likely to 'have babies and work in a clothes shop' whilst Al (IT, Huntsman) wanted to be an IT consultant, preferably in America, but followed this up by saying somewhat wistfully 'I can dream it'. These and similar comments also indicated that the young people considered their occupational aspirations to be as unattainable as lifestyle aspirations which included ambitions such as becoming millionaires, living in 'a mansion in North Yorkshire' and ownership of luxury vehicles. Significantly, although the young people's plans for achieving their fantasy futures were vague, and certainly inconsistent with their occupational ambitions, their plans for achieving their occupational ambitions were equally vague. Data indicated that all the young participants had suggested that they had bought into credentialism as a route to success and expressed commitment to obtaining 'good' jobs requiring 'qualifications'. Despite this, only one of those interviewed had any notion of the career path or credentials necessary to pursue to achieve their expressed career aspiration and, like the young people in Bathmaker's (2001) study, none showed any inclination to investigate this.

However, dreams of fantasy futures or even fantasy occupations may be necessary to enable young people to accept the reality of 'here and now' and to enable them to rationalise pragmatic responses to imperatives such as the need for money, something which was a key pressure for those in this study. In this context the drudgery of low pay low skill work is only temporary because the possibility – however remote - of a return to education or sudden transformation remains and with it some hope for an uncertain future. None of those students in employment at the time of interview enjoyed their jobs or intended to remain in them in the longer term. Rather, employment was an instrumental means of meeting financial obligations, such as contributing to the family income. Most importantly, however, it provided a means of financing the social and leisure activities which formed a key aspect of their identities (see Atkins, 2009 for an extended discussion).

Shared Interpretation?

In the final weeks of the academic year final visits were made to each of the student groups to share my interpretation of the emerging issues from the data, and for them to evaluate this. The emerging analytic themes had been summarised on a final handout, again making use of pictorial representation, white space and clear, unambiguous language. The handout was titled 'Emerging themes from the research or what I have found out' and consisted of a number of statements such as '*most level 1 students have high aspirations (dreams and ambitions). They want to do a lot with their lives*' and '*many level 1 students do not know how to achieve their ambitions*. *They do not know which courses to do or how long it will take'*. Two copies of the handout were given to each participant – one to keep, and one to comment on. In order to encourage the students to use some form of analysis, they were asked to say whether they though each statement was true or false, and why they thought each statement was true or false. The responses to this task were variable. Eight students wrote copiously, providing considerable, rich, data, others made brief (sometimes unclear) annotations and some simply identified true or false. Wellington (2000:24/25) has suggested that this approach, in which the participants checked that my interpretation accurately reflected their views and attitudes, is a form of methodological triangulation. However, I would argue that its instrumental value is less than its moral and ethical value, in that it provided a further mechanism for demonstrating respect and value for the young people participating. In terms of methodological value, as Schwandt (1998:229) argues, such an approach provides a basis for greater insight into the feelings and views of the participants. It is possible that more in depth data might have been elicited from more young people had it been possibly to conduct this part of the process verbally. Time and cost were factors in the decision to use a written approach, as were ethical considerations about the extent of the commitment already made by each individual and the institutions concerned. Towards the end of the academic year, as tutors were working with students to ensure that all completed successfully and on time, further interviews would have been very disruptive.

<u>Methodological Challenges</u>

Communication with the participant group formed the most challenging methodological issue of the research. It was necessary to explain the research

process to the students in clear and unambiguous terms, using language with which they were familiar; this meant providing verbal clarity whilst ensuring there was no loss of meaning in my own communication. Ultimately, for example, this meant describing research as 'finding out'. The unsophisticated language used in the explanation was necessary to engage these young people and facilitate them to have sufficient understanding of a somewhat abstract process to contribute to it in a meaningful way.

Verbally, the students' use of less sophisticated language provided great clarity of meaning on almost all occasions, unobscured by rhetoric, as they contributed their views on their lives, education, and the transition from education to work. For example, Paris (HSC Huntsman), whose mother required her to support herself, worked almost full time as a food packer in addition to undertaking her course. Her comments illustrated the tensions between her work, leisure and educational lives.

Paris	Er yes [I work] and it's really hard especially when you're 16. You are there, well I'm there every single day until Friday and that's my last day, good Friday. And I work five hours every day, non-stop. It gets to you sometimes you feel like it's hard work, you're choosing college or work or…
Brady	Not going with your mates
Paris	It's so you're like "I wanna go and see my mates" but you can't because you are in work or you're in college, I still see my friends in college because I'm with them every day but if I want to spend some time with them at night, I can't because I'm working. So I find it hard.

Samir (IT Huntsman), who lived a life constrained by race, poverty and serious physical disability as well as low educational achievement was eloquent in his explanation of what would be denied to him 'I know I can't go to university [because] they have exams, very long exams. After their exams they can do anything they want to'. Fine (1994:20), discussing her work on low-income adolescents in America reported that they gave 'vivid' accounts and were readily critical of society and the education system. This suggests a comparatively high level

of verbal ability and social awareness, similar to that expressed by the level 1 students in this study.

Occasionally, however, young people did find themselves 'lost for words' as they struggled to express a feeling or opinion in written form, particularly when they were asked to review my early impressions of the data and to make comments on this. Natalie, a Woodlands student, who had made an articulate and critical contribution in her interview wrote 'They are all true but I don't know why I think this'. This seemed surprising given her verbal contributions (she knew exactly why she 'thought things'!) but may have reflected a low level of functional literacy, something which was common to all the young participants. Alternatively, at a stage in the programme when the young people were under pressure to complete assessed work, it could also have reflected a reluctance to write, which most associated with 'working hard' (Atkins, 2009:68), rather than an inability to do so.

Wellington and Cole (2004:103) noted similar difficulties in their research, reporting that they had to support articulate young people to complete questionnaires when it became apparent that they had difficulty with the written word. The difficulties experienced by the participants' at this stage of the study thus had implications for the interpretation of the data. The original intention of the study had been to give voice to the young people and their contribution to the data analysis was a key factor in this. Their difficulty in using written media ultimately meant that their participation in the data analysis was more limited than planned, at least in terms of the numbers able to make a meaningful contribution. Ultimately, the voices of many of the young people were diminished at this significant stage of the research process by their difficulty – or reluctance - in using a written medium. These challenges form a powerful argument for the use of exclusively verbal means of participation in participative research with excluded youth and other marginalised groups who may have low levels of functional literacy or other barriers with the written word.

<u>Ethical Tensions</u>
The need to consider the potential ethical issues at all times and in all aspects of the research process and the human relationships encompassed within that process is identified by Denzin and Lincoln (2000:19) and Wellington (2000:54) amongst others. The significant ethical issues anticipated in undertaking this study were those

of informed consent and considerations around the use of participants' voices. These were addressed using a situated approach consistent with the Institutional guidance on ethics and were approved at Departmental level according to university regulations at the time the fieldwork was conducted.

Christians (2000:139) has argued that meaningful application of informed consent 'generates ongoing disputes', whilst Fine *et al* (2000:107/128) pose the question 'Inform(ing) and Consent: who's informed and who's consenting?' and raise issues about the validity of informed consent. This study demanded consideration of the ethical implications of requesting 'informed' consent from an audience, consisting largely of student participants unaware of the human relationship issues arising from ethnographic studies, who would, therefore, be giving consent but not informed consent. Whilst satisfying some ethical guidelines, in terms of conducting educational research as moral practice Sikes and Goodson (2003:48) have suggested that such an approach 'reduces moral concerns to the procedural: a convenient form of methodological reductionism'. The issue of informed consent was addressed by taking a situated, reflexive approach, whilst bearing in mind that 'taking account of my own position does not change reality' (Patai 1994:67). At a practical level, this involved keeping participants involved and informed throughout, using both verbal and written forms of communication, and attempting to establish an ongoing dialogue with them through the medium of email as well as face to face on my visits to them. The use of email was a deliberate choice. Despite some problems with written forms of data, the young people all used text on their mobile phones. Most of them, but not all, had accounts with social networking sites. Those who did not were all female and from similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Few had access to the internet at home. However, all had college email addresses making this a more inclusive medium. A small number of students engaged with me via email; most however, remained content to talk with me on my regular visits.

The engagement with participants throughout the study, in which they contributed to the development of the research process and to the interpretation of the data, also enabled a dialogue about the criteria for what could become public knowledge. This dialogue was critical in demonstrating respect for participants as well as promoting participant interpretation and enabling their voices to be heard. As Bassey (1999:74) has argued, researchers taking data from persons should do so in ways which

recognise those persons' initial ownership of the data and which respect them as fellow human beings who are entitled to dignity and privacy.

It may be argued that creating opportunities for participants to interpret and analyse data demonstrates respect for the people involved, and avoids conducting research which might be criticised as 'exploitative' or unethical, However, how to make 'voices heard without exploiting or distorting those voices is [a] vexatious question' (Olesen 2000:231). The control of the interpretation and selection of the data to be used lies largely with the person conducting the research and as such is open to misinterpretation in a variety of ways. Fine (1992:205/233) has discussed different ways in which the participants' voices may be misused. These include the use of an individual's data to reflect groups, making assumptions that voices are free of power relations, and failing to acknowledge researcher's own position in relation to the voices. She develops these arguments further (1994:19) in her discussion on ventriloquy, in which she considers the implications of the researcher exerting control over the data by electing to use extracts which underpin her own values and perspectives. A further consideration is that of the interpretation of data and its relationship to 'truth'. Any work seeking to construct knowledge about the identity of young people, and to understand how they perceive reality, inevitably involves extensive interpretation of the contributions made by participants in the research. In any act of interpretation , however impartial the writer aspires to be, the person writing the text has a stronger voice than those contributing to it (Simons, 2000:40) and, whilst the text may be written with integrity, reality or truth can only ever reflect the perception of the individual. Indeed, Usher (2000:27) has argued that 'all claims to truth are self-interested, partial and specific'. These debates highlight some of the ethical and philosophical dilemmas raised by the use of the voices of others, including the tension between the need to 'listen to quiet, less powerful voices' (Griffiths, 1998:96) and to reflect those voices in such a way as to retain the original integrity and meaning of the words.

Griffiths (1998:127) also considered the issues around the use of voice and proposed an analysis of the concept of voice, arguing that exploitation of the researched can be avoided by using such an analysis as a framework for understanding what is and what is not exploitative. Using this analysis supported a reflexive approach and

provided a framework to support an appropriate and ethical response to issues as they arose during the fieldwork, analysis and writing.

In fact, the most significant problem in the representation of voice, and the selection of data to be used was anonymisation of the participants. Those students who agreed to participate were happy to give information, and to contribute to all parts of the process, including giving (often critical) opinions on my initial interpretation of the data. However, almost without exception the young people were very reluctant to be anonymised, despite having disclosed intimate details about their lives. These covered a wide range of highly sensitive issues such as a history of living in Care, criminal activity, pregnancy and medical problems. Interestingly, all the disclosures were made almost ordinary in the context of the language and lack of emotion used during each disclosure, perhaps reflecting the very significant complexities of life faced by these young people on a daily basis. Therefore, the dialogue that evolved became less about what I, as the researcher could use, but more about me explaining the necessity for anonymising the participants and their institutions and explaining the potential consequences of making some of this information public. This conflicted with the students' wish to be recognised for their contribution: recognition was perceived to be others beyond the group knowing both that they had participated and what they had contributed. Ultimately, it became necessary to deny the young people the voice that they might have chosen in order to give them a more public voice which could contribute to the debate on level 1 provision and the lives of students who access it.

Conclusion

This study took on an organic form as, at each stage in the process through dialogue with the young people participating, different methods of involving them were discussed and implemented. Using this approach, rather than being restricted to a rigid, pre-planned methodology facilitated a far greater involvement of young people than I originally anticipated would be possible. However, it also proved challenging as I consciously tried to create a balance between detachment and engagement, objectivity and partiality and to represent the voices of the young people with integrity whilst conscious that my own voice was 'hidden', just 'under the covers' of the marginalised (Fine 1994:19). Despite these methodological challenges, the involvement with and by the young people not only enriched the process in terms of

human relationship and experience, but also enhanced the research in terms of the wealth of data which was ultimately generated. These data included unsought material the students wished to share which provided valuable windows into their lives and identities. Despite this, the study did have some limitations in terms of its aim to actively promote social justice through the research process.

Throughout the study attempts were made to engender a collaborative and dialogical approach. Inevitably, some of those attempts were more successful than others. This raises two key questions. Firstly, to what extent was the study truly collaborative and tow what extent did it pay lip service to collaboration? Secondly, to what extent were the power relations between the participants and me influenced by the methodological approach used? To answer this it is important to take note of the particular characteristics of the participant group who differ in a number of important respects from those in some earlier studies using a similar approach. The participants in this study may be seen to be more powerless and the victims of greater structural injustice than the adults in Johnston's (2000) study who had a strong intrinsic motivation for participation and were certainly far removed from the professionals in Griffith's (1998) study. Their positioning on the margins of education, work and society perhaps gave them more in common with the learning disabled adults in the inclusive research carried out by Dowse (2009) and by Bjornsdottir and Svensdottir (2008). Not yet defined as 'adults' and still negotiating an uncertain transition from school to the world of work these young people were victims of multiple structural injustices in terms of their social class, race, gender and perceived educational achievement. Each of these factors constrained their horizons for action and potential for agency. As a consequence, the power imbalance between the students and myself was significantly greater than it would have been had a less marginalised group, such as A level students, been the main focus of the study. It was also more difficult to address. However, that imbalance was to some extent redressed by ensuring that the participants were given the opportunity to have their voices heard in a public arena, and by the steps taken to enable them to mediate their voices themselves, such as involving them in the data analysis. Despite this, I am forced to acknowledge that despite my best efforts much of the power and control remained with me. However, as Lincoln and Guba (2000:175) have argued, control can be a means of redressing power imbalances and enabling

the previously marginalised to achieve voice, something which they go on to suggest, can be used as a means of empowerment and advocacy.

In summary, the use of a participative research process did succeed in demonstrating value and respect for the young participants and in providing a public forum in which their voices could be heard. It also enabled them to contribute to the research process, although this contribution was inevitably limited by their lack of previous experience of any type of research. However, by providing insights which could not have been obtained by 'researching on', in methodological terms the approach provided a useful means of exploring the lives and identities of marginalised youth. Perhaps more importantly, in the context of the values of social justice that underpinned it, it provided an opportunity for the young participants to make their (eloquent) voices heard from beyond the model of disadvantage and disengagement in which government policy seeks to confine them.

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