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Messy methods: Making sense of participatory research with young people in PE and sport

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Abstract

Participatory research with young people has become an approach increasingly adopted by researchers within PE and sport. In this paper, we draw on our research diaries to collectively reflect on our experiences of attempting to work in participatory ways. Although we each work with different young people and have adopted differing participatory approaches, there are similarities in our research experiences. This includes recurring accounts of ‘muddling through’ and messiness occupying our reflections. We are also struck by the absence of concern within the literature to reveal the messiness of research. In light of our shared musings about participatory research with different young people, this paper offers some preliminary thoughts about our experiences of dealing with this messiness. We take as our focus the increasing concerns to support rights-based research that advocates inclusion, participation and empowerment, and draw on our research to explore how these features were worked towards. In these discussions we are open about the limitations of the research, challenges encountered and the resultant messiness arising. Our conclusion turns to what it might mean if researchers were more transparent about the usually unpredictable, messy and confusing situations that arise in the practice of doing participatory research with young people.

Keywords

Participatory research, young people, physical education and sport, research diaries, social justice

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Introduction

Research is fundamentally a process of muddling through, sometimes feeling lost and out of place, asking stupid questions, being corrected and having our preconceptions destroyed. (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 511)

As Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) highlight, research is not always a straightforward endeavour and can be an unclear and confusing process. In this paper, we reflect on our experiences of engaging in research and explore how we have navigated through this sometimes uncertain and unsteady terrain. We initially came together because of our ongoing conversations about working and researching with young people in the context of physical education (PE), sport and physical activity. We are united by a concern for social justice and to support this work have adopted, what we consider to be, participatory and creative ways of researching. Hayley's work focuses on the PE experiences of young disabled people and has sought to promote accessible ways to research with these young people. Annette's work with South Asian, Muslim girls, draws on participatory research to explore their experiences of PE and physical activity. Eimear favours Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a way to respond to both the political challenges and the inherent power imbalances of conducting research with young people. To help us better understand our experiences in these contexts, we have periodically scribed our thoughts in a research diary. These diaries recorded reflections about how our decisions, actions and beliefs contributed to the research process. We have also noticed how our research diaries have served a cathartic function. They have become a repository for documenting the frustrations, highs, lows, confusions and vulnerabilities encountered when attempting to engage in participatory research. We have noted that although we each adopted differing participatory approaches, there are similarities in our research experiences. This includes recurring accounts of 'muddling through' and messiness occupying our reflections. As Plows (2018: xiii) highlights, research can be very messy, particularly when 'negotiating access, developing relationships with research participants, navigating the research dynamic, and what "counts" as the research site'. The following diary extracts offer a glimpse of us muddling through various research projects:

When we were working in the library today a boy came in and said he'd been sent to work with me because he'd been naughty. I'm still not sure why he was sent to me but I don't want the other students thinking they're here because they've been naughty, that's not how this research project has been setup. (Hayley's Research Diary)

All I kept thinking was I hope a teacher doesn't come into the room. One of the girls was standing on a chair singing Rihanna; another was texting on her mobile; and the rest of them were cracking open cans of pop and crisps as if it were break time [recess]. If I get any data from that session it'll be a miracle! (Annette's Research Diary)

Once they began scrapbooking they began talking: talking about their families and their bodies and diets and boys and make-up. At the beginning I didn't know where to start questioning and probing and prompting. There was so much stuff circulating, so many potentially harmful preconceptions around bodies, and weight and physical activity and gender and life! It was like a bad interview, where you know that you've missed too many entry points, too many opportunities to gain a better understanding of what it is you're trying to gain some clarity on but you're struggling to pull it back. (Eimear's Research Diary)

In sharing these reflections, we realised that the plans put in place for working with our research participants did not always materialise in the ways we envisaged. We recognised the interactions with research participants can create uncertainty and a need to quickly react to different situations. This responsiveness is not straightforward and can be messy: Hayley thinking about how to deal with the boy sent to her by a teacher; Annette contemplating how to manage a teacher entering the classroom and seeing the girls breaking the school rules; and Eimear feeling overwhelmed by the discussions with the research participants and not knowing how to begin to unravel what was said.

We have taken comfort from our shared experiences and in doing this have begun to ask more searching questions about the research we have undertaken. In particular, our conversations have prompted us to think back to our research training; training that failed to mention the messiness we encounter. We are also struck by the relative absence of concern within the literature to reveal the messiness of research, though Luguetti and Oliver's (2018) recent example of becoming an activist researcher offers a valuable insight. It is as if research has to be reported in a sanitised manner, hiding any signs of the challenges, failings and dilemmas faced when researching (Harrow et al., 2018). Importantly, Cook (2009) points to a number of benefits of disclosing messiness, including offering a more honest insight about the research process. Furthermore, reporting messiness acknowledges this as a possibility, and this can be comforting to researchers who otherwise could lose confidence in their research abilities. Finally, Cook (2009) believes by concealing messiness it is likely that such features and experiences are viewed as negative. In the spirit of promoting a more open dialogue about research with young people, this paper offers some preliminary thoughts about our experiences of dealing with this messiness. We begin by exploring recent shifts in thinking regarding the engagement of young people in research and the increasing concern to support rights-based research that advocates *inclusion, participation* and *empowerment*. After this, we each take one of these central features and reflect on how this was worked towards in our research. In these discussions, we want to be open about the limitations of the research, challenges encountered and the resultant messiness arising. Our conclusion turns to what it might mean if researchers were more transparent about the usually unpredictable, messy and confusing situations that arise in the practice of doing participatory research with young people.

Researching with young people

Recent years have seen a shift in thinking that recognises young people as competent social actors, rather than 'cultural dopes' (Prout and James, 1997); a view that permeates human rights and has filtered, to a greater or lesser extent, into legislation and policy internationally (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). This shift acknowledges young people are experts in their own lives and should be listened to (Clark and Moss, 2011; Van Blerk and Kesby, 2009). Greig et al. (2013) note that assumptions regarding young people's inability to contribute meaningfully to research have affected not only the nature of the research questions asked, but also delayed the development of methods that speak directly to young people. In this regard, within PE and physical activity research there is a growing trend towards using, what could be considered to be, innovative and creative methods. It is claimed these approaches have shifted the emphasis away from researching *on* to researching *with* young people (O'Sullivan and MacPhail, 2010). Following the lead of other fields, researchers in PE and sport have worked using photo elicitation, drawings, media exploration, time-lines, scrapbooks and journals to engage research participants (see, for example, Azzarito and Kirk, 2013; O'Sullivan and MacPhail, 2010).

By researching in, what could be considered by some, less conventional ways, scholars are beginning to better understand and grapple with a range of issues that more positively support young people within research. For example, there is an increasing acknowledgment that sufficient time needs to be given to nurture a meaningful and trusting research relationship between the researcher(s) and the young people (Enright and O'Sullivan, 2012a). In addition, adopting creative approaches may enhance the appeal of research to a broader range of young people's needs, interests and abilities. Furthermore, there is recognition that the research process should be an enjoyable experience in order to attract and retain the interest of those taking part (Fox, 2013; McNamara, 2011). In part, we believe these kind of considerations contribute to the 'cornerstones of a rights-based framework for children's research' (McNamara, 2011: 137) and are underpinned by a desire to work towards *inclusive, participatory* and *empowering* research endeavours. That said, we are conscious these are bold aspirations for research and may not become the reality. We concur with Coyne and Carter (2018), Fox (2013) and Holland et al. (2010) in their calls to more fully interrogate the claims researchers make about researching. These scholars point to the need to critically explore the assumptions that participatory and creative approaches are more enabling for participants and yield better research. Holland et al. (2010: 373) caution that 'we must not hide behind bland statements that research was participatory.' In the spirit of extending this debate and promoting openness we consider a number of questions: What does it mean to be 'included' in research? In what ways can 'participation' be considered? What does it mean to be 'empowered' within and through research? We each draw from our research to reflect on these questions – Hayley troubles notions of inclusion, Annette considers the idea of participation and Eimear problematises some of her efforts to support empowering research experiences.

It should be noted that the research projects reflected upon in this paper were not conceived of or undertaken together. Instead, these projects provided the source for our subsequent collaborative research conversations. These discussions initially offered an opportunity to reflect in a relatively open way about our motives and aspirations for researching with young people. Later we turned to our experiences of the realities of researching with young people and in doing this shared accounts from our research diaries. We did not draw on a formal analytical approach to foreground the diary extracts shared between each other or those featured in this paper. Rather, we merely chose to select diary extracts that most resonated with our emergent collective discussions.

Hayley's research and inclusion

In the research I have been involved in with young disabled people I have researched using drama, drawings, interviews, focus groups, photo elicitation and Makaton (pictured symbols) and attempted to work with young people as co-researchers (Fitzgerald, 2009). My approach to researching with young disabled people has been influenced by the different adults and young disabled people I have worked with in disability sport. As a sport development practitioner, I came to recognise the importance and value of communicating in accessible ways. For example, when working with people with learning disabilities I advertised sports opportunities using alternative formats such as Makaton symbols. When facilitating meetings with this group I used 'easy speak' (an accessible approach to communication) and limited the use of technical jargon. I was sensitive to the communication abilities of the people I was working with and attempted to work in ways that supported everyone to contribute to discussions and decision-making. I have also been influenced by alternative approaches to research found within disability studies (Aldridge, 2015; Barton, 2005; Wickenden, 2011) and broader concerns to challenge notions of young disabled people as

vulnerable and dependent (Skyrme and Woods, 2018). I have had inclusion at the centre of my concerns and continue to grapple with what it means to undertake inclusive research. Like broader understandings of inclusion, researchers have differing ideas of what this means and consequently how they go about researching in inclusive ways. For example, some researchers believe conducting inclusive research simply involves including within your sample specific groups of research participants who may typically be excluded from research. In contrast, other researchers would take a more holistic approach and consider inclusive research to be a collective endeavour with, and for, research participants (Walmsley et al., 2018). On this latter approach, Walmsley and Johnson (2003) offer a number of principles that underpin inclusive research with disabled people including: ownership of the research problem by disabled people; promoting collaboration between the researcher and research participants; involving people with disabilities in the process of doing the research; and ensuring all aspects of the research are accessible. In considering these principles it should be recognised that these extend beyond what McNamara (2011) considers inclusive research to be and, to some extent, overlap with McNamara's thinking about participation and empowerment. In part, the issue here is that each of Walmsley and Johnson's (2003) principles are open to interpretation – for example, what does it mean to own the research problem, what constitutes collaboration, what are the best approaches to make research accessible and who decides this? More recently, ideas around inclusive research have been criticised for overly attending to the process of engaging in research rather than been attentive to the impact of the research in the lives of disabled people (Nind, 2014, 2017).

In my attempts to support young disabled people in schools to take ownership of the research problem, I have sometimes adopted an open agenda approach. My research participants have been supported to generate their ideas about what, with who and how the research should be undertaken. Having undertaken research in this way on a number of occasions, I realise my approach should perhaps be considered more as a mere gesture to ownership and collaboration. Indeed, looking back on my research diary, it is interesting to note that my initial concerns about the research are centred on my performance and the potential outcomes of the research:

I've not done research like this before. I am concerned. Is it going to work? What are the students going to want to do? Will I be able to properly support them? Will I get good data? What am I going to do if it doesn't work? (Hayley's Research Diary)

When I reflected on this diary extract, I recognised I had a range of concerns. Some of these were about my relationship and ability to work with the research participants and their enthusiasm (or lack of it) for the research. Essentially, I was uncertain and lacked confidence about what was planned. I also seemed preoccupied with the idea of it 'working' – I had invested in developing this research and seemed to be very aware of the need for this to work. It is interesting to note that the 'working' was principally on my terms and for my benefit. Although I do not explicitly say this, I would have been concerned to gather 'good data' that could contribute to a published output. Relatively early in my career I was acutely aware that publishing was one marker of academic success. As Cook (2009) notes, the prospect of a research endeavour not working may have marked my research abilities in negative terms and this would have also preoccupied my thoughts and confidence. I now recognise that the idea of 'working' is much broader than this and I had initially taken a very narrow view based on my aspirations for the research. Whilst at one level I was committed to researching with participants inclusively, this seemed to be contingent upon me also gaining from this process. Taking the lead from Nind (2017), I would now be more inclined to not

centralise concerns around generating ‘good data’, instead paying more attention to engaging in ‘good research’ and recognising this is likely to be interpreted in different ways by myself, research participants and the academy.

I also took for granted that ‘giving’ ownership and supporting collaboration was something that the research participants would want and positively respond to. It was only later in the process that I thought more about these kinds of issues. For example, similar to Luguetti and Oliver (2018), by encouraging the research participants to set the research agenda in terms of its focus I had to reconcile that I may not learn much about their PE experiences, which were of interest to me. I also came to realise that offering a blank canvas for the research participants to develop the research would require considerable support in helping them to better understand the possibilities:

I’m beginning to realise that supporting the students is a job and a half. I’m having to strip everything back. I’ve struggled to talk about what ‘research’ is. And then I’m conscious that all of this needs to be interesting too. I think I’ve underestimated doing this project. It’s not even like I know the students well. I’m making so many assumptions about them and I’m responding in a very ‘researchy’ way – like I would with research assistants or dissertation students rather than children. (Hayley’s Research Diary)

My acknowledgment that I was ‘researchy’ points to how my support was based on my researcher-defined outlook. I had been socialised into becoming a researcher and was making assumptions and acting within the traditions of an academic researcher. As Skyrme and Wood (2018) highlight, this is unlikely to correspond with the experiences of co-researchers, like the young people I was working with. I had underestimated the work needed to be done to make more relevant and meaningful the purpose and processes of engaging in research.

Another principle of inclusive research outlined by Walmsley and Johnson (2003) is concerned with accessibility. On reflection, I have been more attentive to this issue and sometimes less concerned with the other principles discussed. The need to support accessible research became apparent to me when considering some of the young people with severe learning disabilities I have worked with, who did not verbally communicate. These young people may be excluded from a research project where the preferred approach to data collection is interviews. This restricted view of listening and inflexibility in research design often means many disabled people who communicate using Makaton and other augmented forms are presumed to be unable to make meaningful contributions to research. This perspective is often not questioned as it merely replicates wider views within society that position disabled people as lesser than non-disabled people (Oliver, 2009). I have found engaging with young disabled people becomes more productive when consideration is primarily given to the person’s communication needs. From this standpoint, research design and collection strategies can be adapted in ways that reflect the research participants’ preferred means of communication. This may seem a rather obvious action to take but it is something not often thought about by researchers. As I reflect in my diary:

Week three of sitting in on a lesson. It’s been good to see how the teacher works with the students. She’s got a great relationship with them, I’m not sure I’ll get to that point with them. Jack seems to say a few words (mainly yes and no) but uses the symbols. Ross is much more verbal and can dominate. Marie uses signing and the symbols. The support assistant seems to give her a lot of encouragement to make choices about which symbols she selects. I need to ask the teacher about the symbols and get a better sense of how I could use these with them. I can see an interview just wouldn’t work with most of them but they will respond to the symbols. (Hayley’s Research Diary)

Inclusive research is a process rather than an outcome and is dependent upon the setting and participants you are working with. Most of all, it is contingent upon the researcher recognising the multifaceted nature of inclusion and the limits set if we take a narrow view of what constitutes inclusion. Participation is implicit in much of the research I have just reflected upon. It is this feature of rights-based research that Annette discusses next.

Annette's research and participation

Those engaging in research with young people claim participation can take many guises (Fox, 2013; Greig et al., 2013; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; McNamara, 2011). Earlier thinking was guided by Hart's (1992) 'ladder of participation', which attempted to illustrate varying degrees of collaboration when working with young people. Later, Hart (1997) critiqued the ladder for being somewhat simplistic – for example, the ladder can imply that young people operating at the higher rungs are involved in more superior projects, which may not be the case. Moreover, whilst the ladder provides a crude measure of how much young people are enabled to participate, it does not problematise who is enabled – the emotionally literate and those for whom White middle class means of communicating are the norm (Holland et al., 2010). Similarly, the ladder fails to acknowledge how other identity markers – disability (discussed by Hayley earlier), ethnicity, gender and class – may influence engagement and participation. Dentith et al. (2012) extend discussions regarding participation by identifying the features of YPAR. These include: the researcher and participants working together to conceptualise, implement and interpret research; listening to and honouring silenced voices; communitarian politics aiming for social justice and participant satisfaction; and developing skills for socially transformative action. It is worth noting that these features overlap with the principles of inclusive research discussed by Hayley, particularly in relation to ownership of the research problem, and collaboration between the researcher and research participants (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003).

Next, in reflecting upon my own research, I draw upon the work of Hart (1997), Dentith et al. (2012) and others to explore issues associated with accessing a research setting, who participates, when participation takes place and the nature of participation. In terms of access and who participates, this can often be a pragmatic decision rather than one based on sampling criteria. For example, I was able to undertake research focusing on the PE and physical activity experiences of a group of South Asian, Muslim girls because of contacts in a school with a diverse student body. In my attempts to promote participation for all, I offered every girl in one year group the opportunity to be involved in the research. However, I was mindful that in concentrating on including one year group I was excluding all others. Whilst many within the year group wanted to participate, the size and scope of the research further limited the possible number of participants. Twenty-three girls were chosen based on teachers' recommendations, the girls completing informed assent forms and gaining parental consent, and organising themselves into focus groups. Like Holland et al. (2010), I acknowledge that participation in these terms privileged girls with the emotional literacy and educational capital to negotiate participation with their parents, teachers and each other. As noted in my research diary, I subsequently discovered that many of the girls were considered 'high achievers' academically and further questioned if choice over participation was ever really there:

Looking at the school's OFSTED report, and talking to the girls about their GCSEs and career options, I am reminded that this is a relatively high performing school and many of these girls (and their parents) have high hopes for their future. I now question the extent to which these girls may have perceived they

had a choice over whether to be actively engaged in the project and the production of the research artefacts. The fact that these activities were located in Personal, Social, Citizenship and Health Education (PSCHE) lessons, and part of the girls' formal education, will no doubt have influenced their decision to engage. (Annette's Research Diary)

I also acknowledge that involving adult gatekeepers in deciding which girls were involved negates viewing the girls as competent social actors (Prout and James, 1997). However, like others (Fox, 2013; McNamara, 2011), I was limited in my ability to shift this position within the boundaries of the school's policies and the university's adult-centric (research ethics) procedures.

In relation to the nature of participation, this particular research project was undertaken within a school setting. This context influenced when we were able to undertake research, the kinds of activities engaged in and how the girls related to me. For instance, whilst I attempted to meet with the girls during lunch or after school, many were reluctant to give up this free time, and I had to look for alternative opportunities. The school facilitated me meeting with the girls during their PSCHE lesson as it was recognised that my research resonated with some aspects of this subject. Consequently, whilst my research activities were intended as an alternative from their usual classes, they could also be perceived as an extension of schoolwork. In an attempt to distinguish my research activities from formal lessons I was clear from the start that the girls' participation in any of the activities and the production of research artefacts were not obligatory. Girls responded accordingly with some producing these and others not. The sessions took place away from other students and teachers and as the girls became more relaxed they began to eat crisps, text on their phones, chat and play music. Whilst these practices were not permissible in their regular classes, like others (Fitzpatrick and Allen, 2017; O'Brien, 2019), I did not challenge them and hoped supporting this more informal environment would position my research and me differently. I also attempted to distance myself from the identity of a teacher in other ways. For example, I encouraged the girls to call me by my first name, wore casual clothing, shared stories about being a university student and offered glimpses into my life. I hoped these strategies would help to develop trust and begin to disrupt hierarchical power relations (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Fitzpatrick and Allen, 2017). However, 'we can not know all the effects of our presence, or even be fully conscious of our embodiment' (Fitzpatrick and Allen, 2017: 54). Thus, I came to accept that the girls (and others in the school) would make their own decisions regarding who and what I was:

Throughout my observations I have consistently been called Miss by students, 'Miss, are you taking us today?', 'Miss, am I doing it right?' 'Miss, I've forgotten my kit' (I reiterate I am not a teacher) In today's lesson a teacher came into the dance studio with a pupil and told me she had caught her truanting. Despite my assertions that I was a student observing the class, and pointing out the PE teacher, I was told quite curtly that I had to report it whoever I was. (Annette's Research Diary)

This example crystallises the dilemma encountered whilst at the school concerning my identity. The teacher identity I was trying to reject often became reinforced and the researcher identity I was attempting to present became less evident. During data collection involving observations of PE lessons I utilised strategies similar to O'Brien (2019) to negate this teacher identity including distancing myself from the teachers, chatting to girls informally, and not displaying my staff card. These were a series of conscious and continuous acts of resistance to 'mute power' (Fitzpatrick and Allen, 2017), develop trust and negotiate my identity. Like O'Brien (2019), there were moments when I felt like I had shrugged off my teacher's mantle. For example, when girls asked for advice

when getting into trouble with a teacher. Yet, this could be quickly followed by a student asking me if they could be excused from PE. I felt lost and often asked myself, 'Who am I?'. In retrospect, I have reconciled that my expectations around my identity were somewhat unrealistic and I would have needed a sustained presence in the school and with the girls to trouble existing power relations.

I have also reflected upon the possibilities for participants to be involved at different phases of the research process (Dentith et al., 2012; Hart, 1997). In this project, my attempts at participation were limited to using participatory methods for data collection. The girls were invited to take photographs, draw, write and complete mapping activities. I believed these interactive and creative approaches to data collection might be more appealing than traditional methods. By offering the girls some degree of flexibility I hoped this would begin to disrupt power relations found in research. For example, I found that girls sometimes created research artefacts that were different to the initial brief given to them:

I provided the girls with cardboard boxes that I envisaged them using as physical repositories to place objects e.g. kit, and/ or reflections about PE. As they placed these items in the box I thought we could talk about why these were included to open up discussions about their experiences. Instead, the girls enthusiastically grabbed felt tip pens and started to decorate the boxes quite openly with their likes and dislikes about the subject. (Annette's Research Diary)

This highlighted to me that research participants could positively engage and their participation may sometimes focus on what they wanted to do rather than what I had envisaged.

Whilst participation extended into data collection in this research, I now consider this to be somewhat limited and not supporting the more holistic notion of participation as outlined by Dentith et al. (2012), particularly in relation to working together, participant satisfaction and the development of skills. Like Fitzpatrick and Allen (2017) found, there was a tension between generating data that would be useful to my research agenda and at the same time meaningful to the research participants (Stride, 2016). In retrospect, having a more open approach to research, like Hayley, may have enabled the girls' research agenda to be prioritised from the beginning, and, therefore, supported a participatory ethos beyond merely data collection:

I recognise that there is plenty of data but I question to what extent this was collected in a participatory way. Have they become more critical? Yes. And, they tell me they are more confident to speak in class. But is this enough to create change? No. I would have needed a year at least to help them begin to develop these kinds of skills and abilities. (Annette's Research Diary)

As Enright and O'Sullivan (2012a) highlight, building relationships with research participants and time are crucial to supporting participatory research. With the time I had negotiated with the school and girls, I now question the extent to which my ambitions for participation were attainable. I am also more aware of the significance of the school as a research setting in terms of building those relationships but also brokering who participates and how (Fitzpatrick and Allen, 2017). I have come to realise that participation within research is influenced by many factors and can mean many things. After experiencing the messiness and muddling through associated with research, I acknowledge that 'participation is not an *all or nothing* phenomenon' and because of this the idea of participation needs to be continually interrogated (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015: 67).

Eimear's research and empowerment

I have slowly learned to avoid the term 'empowerment'. As a wide-eyed PhD student, I stumbled across a folded, dog-eared article inside an inherited copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Friere, 1993). The article was called 'Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy', and written by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989). I had previously read the work of Friere and was taken by his conception of empowerment as a process of dialogic 'conscientisation', a kind of liberation where teachers and learners together read 'the word and the world' (Friere, 1993). However, the arguments made by Ellsworth challenged me to reflect on and rethink a concept that I had, relatively unproblematically, deified. Ellsworth (1989: 298) argued:

Key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy – namely, 'empowerment,' 'student voice,' 'dialogue,' and even the term 'critical' – are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination. By this I mean that when participants in our class attempted to put into practice prescriptions offered in the literature concerning empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, we produced results that were not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against, including Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and 'banking education'.

As was often the case during my PhD (and indeed since), theoretical red flags went up. Further reading, and specifically Gore's (1990) analysis on the politics of empowerment within discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy, did nothing to disavow me of my emerging conviction that empowerment is an intellectually messy concept that I (and many others) had under-theorised (Dominelli, 2000). Gore (1990: 21) rejected the construction of power as property and advocated for a rethinking of empowerment as 'the exercise of power in an attempt to help others exercise power'.

My efforts to understand how to help young people exercise their power in research contexts led me to the participatory methods scholarship. Whilst it was easy to find grand claims that participatory methods 'empower' young people, there were also many that trouble these assertions (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). An extract from a reflection I wrote for a seminar during my PhD revealed my struggles in making sense of the literature, specifically around empowerment.

So, most days I'm reading stuff that I don't understand at first pass. So, I just keep reading and *usually* after a few reads I get it. But then, I'll stumble upon another article or chapter that undermines or contradicts what I've just come to understand. The problem, or at least a big part of the problem, is that I'm on shaky ground theoretically and methodologically at the moment. I have so much more that I need to read and understand... And I'm back in the school working on the project with the girls on Tuesday. (Eimear, PhD seminar, 2011)

The project in question was a longitudinal YPAR project with young women in an Irish secondary school where I worked with the participants to understand and help them transform self-identified barriers to PE and physical activity participation. The participatory methods we recruited included photovoice, timeline construction and scrapbooking. By the time we began the project I had read enough to understand that participatory methods were 'no less problematic, or ethically ambiguous than any other research method' (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 513). However, I had also read enough to appreciate the lure of participatory methods and so I persisted.

My early experiences with YPAR taught me that no participatory method can, in and of itself, guarantee a more equal or more empowering research encounter for participants. Participatory methods can be, and are, used without any regard for issues of power or inequality (Packard, 2008). However, if research begins with the intent to address power differentials and inequalities in the research process then it can become more about collaboration and negotiation with research 'participants', rather than simply a 'hit and run' (Pink, 2007: 57) process of extracting information from research 'subjects'. I have written elsewhere about young people's perspectives on their engagement with participatory methods (Enright and O'Sullivan, 2012a), and the kind of methodological sensibility required to support participatory research with children (Enright and O'Sullivan, 2012b). What I have consistently argued is that relationships and time are key. What I had never truly considered was if and how a participatory methodological sensibility could survive in a research context where hypotheses and measurable indicators are determined at the start of the research, and specific, desirable outcomes articulated before a project has begun. That is, until a corridor conversation with a colleague resulted in me joining a project he was leading.

At the time of writing, I am undertaking research with five young people on their lived experiences of disability and sport. I was invited to join this longitudinal, mixed-methods study after it had begun, after many of the major methodological decisions had been made and after ethics had been approved. This project is unlike the majority of those I have previously been involved in. It did not begin with the intent to address power differentials and inequalities in the research process. Rather, its focus was to enhance the swimming performance of five teenage participants with cerebral palsy. However, what I brought to the research was my appreciation of participants' expertise and agency, and an intention to create a communicative, dialogic research space. Thus, whilst interviews were the pre-identified method of choice, my initial conversations with the participants revolved around their favoured methods of self-expression. These conversations led to one participant highlighting that photos helped her remember and express herself and she would like if we talked more about the photos she had taken of sport in her life during the interviews. Another participant, RC (self-selected pseudonym), asked if his poetry might be recognised as data: 'I'm the real me in my poems. The words and word play allow me to be more honest, more powerful in my perspective . . . to take charge of my story' (RC). Whilst this research project was not designed to be participatory in nature, what this experience taught me is that opportunities to help others exercise their power can present themselves in unlikely places. In a recent diary entry, I wrote the following:

When I initiate projects, my bias is always towards participatory research. However, joining a project that was unapologetically interventionist in nature, has been an incredible learning experience. It has taught me that opportunities for young people to 'take charge of [their] story'(RC) are not limited to purely participatory research designs. RC is now narrating his experiences of sport, PE, and the intervention at the heart of the larger study through poetry . . . I love poetry, but am not sure I would have been brave enough to identify poetry as a data collection method in *this* research context, had RC not requested it. While I remain reticent about framing participatory work with young people within the discourse of empowerment, and do not believe that RC's reflection provides unequivocal evidence that he was empowered through the research process, what it does suggest is that opportunities for young people to be agents of and for their own lives exist wherever those young people exist. (Eimear's Research Diary)

If, as Lather (1991: 4) suggests, ‘empowerment is a process one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done “to” or “for” someone’, then it follows that whilst we might design and even co-design research projects with participants in particular ways, we can never guarantee the empowerment of another. Moreover, it should go without saying that the assumption on the part of the researcher that research participants need to be empowered, that they need ‘fixing’ or ‘changing’, is problematic. By virtue of the basic understanding that young people are ‘competent social actors’ (Prout and James, 1997) who make reasoned decisions and act in the light of their own personal circumstances, it seems essential to realise that we cannot, nor should we seek to, direct the actions or choices of our research participants.

My recent experience with RC and the other four participants has prompted me to seriously consider why and how I had managed to get so many things wrong:

The invitation from Hayley and Annette has caused me to dwell on the notion of empowerment. Yes, I had come to understand it as a complex and nuanced concept that needed to be handled carefully. But, if I’m honest, I think, at least subconsciously, I believed that feminist participatory researchers were more entitled to claim the ‘empowerment’ high ground. However, the data constructed by the young people I’m currently working with are suggesting that this is not the case. When the participants talk about the performance-focused swim training intervention, they say it has helped them become ‘stronger swimmers and stronger people’. They say the process and the people supporting them through it (Physios, Coaches, Biomechanists), have helped them become ‘more confident and assertive’. One of them has even explicitly stated that he feels ‘more empowered to fight for his rights’, because he now realises he had been denied the opportunity to ‘really learn how to swim’ and denied ‘a real physical education’ in school. (Eimear’s Research Diary)

With the swim training intervention being longitudinal, there is time to invest in relationship building and support the meaningful participation of young people in the research. The data the young people are generating is suggestive of individual transformation as well as a desire for social transformation. For me, good research, participatory or otherwise, is all about relationships and time. We do not parachute into the field as empty vessels with audio-recording software. Who we are, and more specifically how we are perceived, significantly influences our relationship with research participants (Aldridge, 2015). It takes time to begin to understand each other’s subjectivities and biographies, to thoughtfully expose and even attempt to unsettle limiting power relations. The participants I am currently working with care little about whether our research design is participatory or mixed-method or interventionist. They care, however, that opportunities are created where they feel comfortable expressing themselves. They also care that the people around them have high expectations, and are willing and able to draw on their expertise to, in this case, help them enhance their swimming performance. While a more nuanced understanding of empowerment always seems necessary, as an amorphous analytical concept, I still find ‘empowerment’ useful. It forces all researchers to seriously consider whose values, whose knowledge, whose agency and whose aspirations and social visions are being privileged.

Concluding remarks

Collectively, we are committed to including young people in research and in doing this have tried to promote participatory ways of researching. This kind of approach is a seductive proposition, particularly for those aspiring to cultivate inclusion, participation and empowerment within, and through, research. However, we are also cautious about the possibilities that can materialise from

participatory research practice. Supporting rights-based research that advocates inclusion, participation and empowerment will not necessarily yield these outcomes. As the diary extracts at the beginning of this paper reveal, the reality of attempting to undertake participatory research is less straightforward. In part, engaging in participatory research needs a willing and open researcher who is prepared to embrace messiness and is happy to commit the time to muddling through (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Plows, 2018). There can be much uncertainty, which can be challenging to manage, especially when you are in the midst of research activities.

Like Holland et al. (2010) and Coyne and Carter (2018), we have also come to recognise that engaging in research with young people brings with it an interesting set of questions to contemplate. In fact, our research seems to have prompted us to ask more questions than we are able to find answers for. For example, is this kind of research better than more conventional approaches? If so, what makes it better and for whom? When and why should participatory research be considered as an approach to adopt and who decides this? How should success be judged and by whom? What kinds of skills and mind-set does a researcher need to facilitate participatory research? What are the challenges of working in participatory ways? Can participatory research sensibilities survive in research contexts or designs where participatory philosophies are not privileged?

In drawing this paper to a close, we want to turn to what it might mean if researchers were more transparent about the unpredictable, messy and confusing situations that arise when undertaking participatory research with young people. In focusing on this point, we seek to highlight what could be gained by moving beyond the sanitised and rather functional accounts often featured in journals and books (Harrow et al., 2018). By talking about the messiness and confusion of working through participatory research, a more authentic picture is gained about the research process. Here, we are not overly concerned with formal criteria associated with authenticity (see, for example, Lincoln and Guba, 1985), but more closely align with Friere's (1993) idea that authenticity represents 'genuineness'. For us, this is offering an explanation of the practical realities of what occurred during the research process. For instance, what was planned, what happened, how were any changes and adaptations worked through and why, how did you feel about this, how were the reactions of the research participants read by the researchers and how did this feed into the research process? Of course, working through these issues is not a minor undertaking and brings to the fore the researcher's intellectual and practical deliberations in a manner that acknowledges this as a complex and situated endeavour. We believe these kinds of discussions also add to the debate about ideas around inclusion, participation and empowerment (McNamara, 2011). These conversations are crucial in attempting to move to a position where these three features of participatory research are not merely named in an (un)critical and (un)questioned way, but instead appropriated with greater awareness and scrutiny.


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