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RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES: METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH STUDIES

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AUTHORS

Julie Lucille Haber del Valle
Helen Cahill
Katherine Romei
Brigitte Rogan
with Jenny Chesters and Hernan Cuervo

RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES: METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH STUDIES

The Youth Research Centre (YRC) plays an integral role in the development of research projects, research publications and researcher training in the fields of sociology of youth and sociology of education and within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), at the University of Melbourne. Our team includes PhD candidates, early career researchers, mid-career researchers, professors and emeritus professors.

The aim of this series of reports is to showcase the variety of research methodologies, methods and perspectives that our researchers engage with. Each report includes three case studies. Our aim is to cover a range of methodologies and topics that may be of interest to students and early career researchers in the disciplines of education and sociology and, particularly, within the field of youth studies.

Within each report, each case study is a snapshot of an actual research project currently being conducted in the YRC. Our researchers are sharing their experiences and offering their advice for conducting social research in an increasingly complex and diverse societal environment. The practices presented in this series of research reports reflect the innovative and contemporary research methodologies and methods undertaken by YRC staff and students. Some of the methods illustrated here are traditional but employed in new ways; while other methodologies and methods depart from conventional research practices to cover more innovative practices to investigate and understand the multidimensional ways of being young in the twenty-first century.

This report includes contributions from Julie Lucille Haber del Valle, Helen Cahill and Katherine Romei, and Brigitte Rogan. In the first piece, Julie Lucille Haber del Valle explores perceptions of 'good pedagogy' through an ethnographic study based in the Philippines. Julie conducted classroom observations, one-on-one interviews with teachers and focus groups with students to gain insights into what students and teachers understand of the concept of 'good pedagogy'. Her contribution also provides an insight into how to conduct research as an outsider with insider knowledge. Although Julie is a Filipino teacher, she does not teach at the schools included in her study. Thus, she has an in-depth understanding of teaching within the system but no personal connections with her participants. Julie sketches out many aspects of her project providing the background, context, ethical considerations, data collection methods and the messy process of coding data.

In the second piece, Helen Cahill and Katherine Romei discuss how post-structuralist and feminist theories informed the development of research methods for a project seeking to elicit conceptions of how gender norms influence behaviour. Their research involved using embodied arts-informed methods to generate data from participants involved in a workshop introducing a gender-based violence prevention program. During the workshop, their participants were encouraged to reflect upon, and challenge, how conceptions of gender are integrated into learning activities. Helen and Katherine detail some of the activities that their participants engaged in to experience the embodiment of gender and expose the power relations embedded within everyday actions. In the third piece, Brigitte Rogan provides an insight into being an insider conducting research within a youth justice facility. After introducing us to her research site, Brigitte outlines the reasons why she chose to conduct her research in the facility where she teaches. Her participants are her colleagues and she reflects upon how this role duality may affect her professional relationships and her research. Brigitte's research aims to fill the gaping hole in our understanding of how the educational needs and best interests of young people in youth justice settings can be served, and how teachers working in these settings conceptualise and strive to enact socially just practices.

Overall, these three pieces on researching young lives are a significant addition to the vibrant field of youth studies. They represent the Youth Research Centre's continuous support, contribution and engagement with high quality research and practice for, with and by young people.

Hernan Cuervo and Jenny Chesters

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

JULIE LUCILLE HABER DEL VALLE

Julie Lucille Haber del Valle is a PhD candidate at the MGSE Youth Research Centre. She is a full-time lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Ateneo de Naga University (ADNU) in the Philippines. She teaches Professional Education, Pedagogy, and Curriculum courses in the undergraduate and masters programs in Ateneo where she also became the chairperson of its Secondary Education Department. She also held leadership roles as a founding director of ADNU Pathways™ (2006-2012) which provides reading and literacy programs using active learning pedagogies in disadvantaged rural public schools and assist high school students to pursue higher education.

Email: **jdel1@student.unimelb.edu.au**

PROFESSOR HELEN CAHILL

Professor Helen Cahill is the Deputy Dean of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, and Director of the Youth Research Centre. She has a distinguished career and reputation both internationally and nationally in youth studies, education and teacher development. She specialises in the use of embodied drama-based participatory research methods to foster the contribution of child and youth voice. She is a leading innovator of Australian and international wellbeing interventions addressing prevention of gender-based violence, mental health, social and emotional learning, sexualities, resilience, respectful relationships and drug education.

Email: **h.cahill@unimelb.edu.au**

KATHERINE ROMEI

Katherine Romei completed her Master of Teaching at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and is currently employed as a research assistant in the Youth Research Centre. She has experience in the research, construction and delivery of positive gender education programs. During her time at the Youth Research Centre, Katherine has supported national and international research projects the areas of student wellbeing, social and emotional learning, mental health, the prevention of gender-based violence and youth studies.

Email: **katherine.romei@unimelb.edu.au**

BRIGITTE ROGAN

Brigitte Rogan is a PhD candidate at the Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Brigitte is a teacher and social worker who has taught at Parkville College, a specialist government school operating within youth justice centres in Victoria, for over five years. Her qualitative research focuses on teachers' conceptualisations of social justice and how these shape the development of their practice with marginalised young people. She will use insider ethnography to explore teachers' pedagogical work in custodial youth justice settings. This project aims to contribute to scholarship which explores disparate understandings and enactment of social justice in education.

Email: **brogan@student.unimelb.edu.au**

USING ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS TO EXPLORE STUDENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT CONSTITUTES 'GOOD PEDAGOGY' IN TWO DISADVANTAGED HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Julie Lucille H. del Valle

ADOPTING A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

My research seeks to explore the dichotomy between learner-centred teaching and teacher-centred instruction. My aim is to understand what constitutes good teaching according to the observer, students, and teachers within two different geographical and cultural school contexts in the Philippines—one junior class in a disadvantaged public high school in a city centre and another junior class in a much poorer rural public high school in a rice-farming community. The research question that guides this study is: *how do students and teachers in a junior urban disadvantaged high school and in a junior rural disadvantaged high school in the Philippines understand and value 'good teaching'?*

As a Filipino teacher myself, I am aware that my views about teaching and learning (teaching philosophy) as well as the cultural systems I am within not only shape my classroom practices but also frame my understanding of what good teaching is. Aside from these beliefs and views, there are other factors beyond my awareness that may have influenced my pedagogical choices and practices. My constructivist ontological assumption and my interest in teacher practices and student reactions informs my choice to use an ethnographic approach. Ethnographic studies suit my study exploring how students and teachers understand, value, and practise learner-centred teaching and teacher-centred instruction within what they regard as 'good teaching', and how these views aligned with what I observe in relation to my reading in the field of learner-centred education.

Schools are communities within larger communities and have their distinctive patterns of behaviour, attitude towards teaching and learning, and "beliefs about education and the roles of teachers and students" (Martin, 1987, p. 20). Through ethnography, I was able to identify and examine the cultural factors that shape, limit, and reinforce the pedagogical choices and practices of teachers. I used the ethnographic methods of classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups to optimize the methodological rigour of my study. These multiple methods provide me with various opportunities to have purposive conversations with both teachers and students in order to obtain information and understand the reasons behind their perceptions of good teaching towards a certain instructional practice or teacher behaviour.

ETHICS OF THE STUDY

After the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee approved my project, I then sought, and was granted, approval by the superintendent of the Division Schools Office, the local unit of the Department of Education in the Philippines. The school principals were then contacted and after gaining their consent, the teachers and students were invited to participate in the project. The students and their teachers were provided with consent forms and Plain Language Statements. I used simple and easily comprehensible language (in English and dialect) to outline the objectives of my research and orient the participants to their roles in the project. The participants in this study were also fully informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent for the students was obtained from them, their parents, and their class adviser. The content of the Plain Language Statement was read to the students prior to the conduct of focus group interviews to remind them that their participation is voluntary and did not have any bearing on their grades in school.

Arrangements were made to ensure that my study posed no risks to the participants, including those who wished to withdraw. To assist in protecting the identities of the participants in this study, pseudonyms were used for each school, teacher and student. However, given the small sample size and the descriptive narratives made in this ethnographic study, it is likely that other teachers and students in the schools in my study would be able to identify the participants.

OBSERVING TWO CLASSROOM 'CULTURES'

To address the research question, I conducted classroom observation in two schools. This phase of my fieldwork lasted for three weeks in each school. I began my classroom observation in the rural school in mid-July until the end of August in 2015. The rural school principal selected a junior class composed of students aged thirteen to sixteen for me to observe. The school principal explained that this grade-eight 'section' in the rural school is where the top-performing junior students are placed and where master teachers (those who have master's degree or units in education and have been teaching in this rural school for at least five years) are assigned to teach. There were 39 students: 22 boys and 17 girls and eight different subject teachers.

I spent about nine hours a day at the rural school. I kept my interaction with the teachers and students to a minimum unless I was invited to participate in the class activities. I sought to ensure that my presence during class times did not interfere unduly with the people and activities under observation so as to not alter the flow of the interaction unnaturally (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000). During class breaks, I joined the students while they had their snacks and lunch. After their classes in the afternoon, I stayed with the students who conducted a school club meeting in their classroom. I also walked with the students as they went home.

In the urban school, the school principal selected a junior class which was one of the three 'honors sections' for me to observe. In this class there were 31 high-achieving students, 11 boys and 20 girls. These students have nine subject teachers who all have a master's degree in education and more than ten years teaching experience. I spent about ten hours a day in the urban school. While they were having their classes, I quietly observed the students and their teachers. On several occasions, they invited me to join in their group activities and class discussions. During class breaks, I joined the students as they ate their snacks and lunch at the school canteen. After class hours, I stayed with groups of students who were assigned as 'cleaners of the day'.

As I conducted classroom observations in the two schools, I engaged in "day-by-day writing up of fieldnotes" which record my "observations and reflections concerning the 'field'" (Atkinson, 1992, p. 5). I took note of what teachers do in the classroom, what their teaching practices look like, what they talk about and the questions they ask, and how their students respond and behave while they teach. I also took note of what the classroom looks like, the pauses and silence in the classroom, the looks on the students' faces while doing an activity, the random day-to-day interactions between the students and their teachers, and amongst students themselves, along with other minute details which took my attention and interest as an observer. This way, my fieldnotes became written accounts which captured a certain 'reality'—that which is a 'portion' of my lived experience within the natural (classroom) setting (Atkinson, 1992; Emerson et al., 2001).

ENGAGING IN 'CONVERSATIONS' WITH INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 teachers, nine from the urban school and eight from the rural school. My interviews with individual teachers took place before, during, and after the classroom observation phase of my fieldwork. The interviews I conducted before and during the period of classroom observation lasted between 15 to 20 minutes. These interviews or 'conversations' (Atkinson et al., 2003) were conducted to gather information about each teacher and to establish rapport with the teachers. These semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask teachers about what I observed in their classes. Most importantly, they provided me with the flexibility to follow any unexpected topics which the teachers raised (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I asked probing or follow-up questions to seek clarification for answers that were unclear or necessitated further exploration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

LISTENING TO STUDENTS' STORIES IN FOCUS GROUPS

Given that my study seeks to investigate what constitutes good and effective teaching, it is necessary that students' voices are included. Although teachers might report that they adopt a particular teaching approach and while this may even appear true to an outside observer, the students' actual experience may differ, or alternatively may validate such claims and observations. Students' perceptions of their teachers' practices therefore contribute richness and depth in understanding what constitutes good teaching. Students' perceptions about good teaching were explored through focus group interviews. While focus group interviews are a powerful tool to capture an individual's conceptions about certain phenomenon, they can also be used to understand a group's perspective.

In the rural school, 32 of the 39 students were given consent by their parents to participate in the focus group interviews. Seven students (mostly eldest boys in the family) needed to help with farm work during their lunch break and were expected to be home right after school due to home chores and additional farm work. The focus groups were completed across five days. I gave the students the choice to join a focus group on a day that suited them. I then conducted a follow up focus group with six students to seek clarification for some of the comments from the first round of focus groups. This extra focus group with the rural students was conducted after the classroom observation in the rural school was completed.

In the urban school, all 31 students agreed to participate in the focus group interviews with consent from their parents and class adviser. I gave the students in the urban school the choice of which focus group they wanted to join. The focus groups were completed across five days. When I had completed my classroom observations in the urban school, I conducted an extra follow up focus group with six of the 31 urban students to further probe comments from the first round of focus groups.

SOME CHALLENGES IN ELICITING STUDENT RESPONSES IN FOCUS GROUPS

My focus group interviews with students from both schools were not without challenges. There were some students who were either shy in expressing their thoughts in a group or who became easily bored in group interviews. As the participants in the focus groups in my study were young adolescents, I used activity-oriented questions and incorporated projective techniques and multi-task exercises.

One of these activities I prepared for the students was to write a word or short phrase on 'metacards' (coloured strips of paper) describing the practices of their teachers which they find most helpful (blue metacards) and least helpful (green metacards) in learning. I asked each student to 'share' with the group what they had written on the metacards. When all students in the focus groups were done with their 'sharing' I asked them to place all their metacards on the floor and discuss which teacher practices they consider as the 'top five' most helpful and least helpful in their learning. Another activity required all the students in the focus group to create a simple installation art as a 'team' where they selected any random object in the classroom to create a 'mini-statue' of their teacher whom they perceived as the most helpful ("good") teacher in their learning. As they 'built' this 'mini-statue', the students were required to talk about who among their teachers is the one whom they perceived to have helped them most in learning well in school. When the students were done, I asked them to say something about their 'mini-statue' and who it represents. I also asked them to explain why they chose a certain object (e.g. coconut fruit in the rural school; cell phone in the urban school) to symbolically represent a specific part of the 'mini-statue' (e.g. head). Through these activities I was able to gather rich data about what they perceived as practices of good teaching through listening to their responses to my questions, to the stories openly shared within the groups, and to the discussion they had among themselves during the activities. Activity-oriented questions allowed me to see elements that would have been neglected if the question was asked in a more direct way.

During the focus groups, the students were seated in a circle at the centre of the classroom. This allowed them enough space to interact with each other during the interview and move around during the short activities. With consent from each participant, I audio-recorded the focus group interviews to allow for later transcription and analysis. I made it very clear to the students that I was the only person who would listen to the recording and that it would only be used for the purpose of my research. This encouraged a more open discussion and active interaction among them, allowing me to gather rich and thick narratives about practices of good teaching.

'MESSY MEANING-MAKING' IN THE DATA ANALYSIS

This ethnographic research produced a significant amount of data. The ethnographic data and the transcripts of both student and teacher interviews were subject to detailed analysis. After transcribing and translating the recordings, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data. I first analysed the interview data by identifying and coding every statement in the transcripts that was related to my research question. I listened to the recordings of the interviews several times and repeatedly read the interview transcripts to develop a "detailed examination of what is said and stimulates a process where one begins to 'incubate' ideas about the possibilities of analysis" (Green et al., 2007, p. 547). In the second stage of data analysis, I grouped together any similar coded statements into categories. I compared themes in individual interviews then across other interviews, then the categories were revisited on many occasions and further merged or taken apart until final categories and underlying themes were identified. These themes were then examined in the light of the extant literature as I sought to locate these themes in a much more extensive tradition of research literature investigating similar questions in other contexts and settings. This process is the final step of data analysis and requires the researcher 'turn to the literature' and link the results of her research "with what we know about people in other settings" through an "an explanation or, even better, an *interpretation* of the issue under investigation" (Green et al., p. 549, emphasis in original). I also coded the ethnographic data.

The systematic process of 'making sense' of a whole data set is far from being a linear process, as Green et al. (2007) further illustrate, and in many instances proves 'messy' because it required me to move back and forth throughout the entire process of data analysis. This was particularly the case with my fieldnotes and classroom observation which required me to (re) visit the data, (re)code categories, and (re)name themes on many occasions. As I moved back and forth through the transcripts and returned to my research question several times, I discovered more information about my topic and thus, codes were added and the meaning of each code was refined. This process of repetition in data analysis, whilst time and energy consuming, deepens the level of interpretation of the data, giving the study a profound sense of 'meaning-making' (Green et al., 2007).

SUMMARY

My research aims to explore what constitutes 'good teaching' according to students and teachers in two specific economic and cultural locations. Using ethnographic methods of classroom observation, student focus groups, and semi-structured interviews with individual teachers allowed me to capture multiple realities that the participants may have about good teaching. Ethnography as a research approach provided me with a glimpse into the lived experiences of the students and teachers within their classroom 'cultures'.

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THINKING WITH THEORY IN THE DESIGN OF RESEARCH METHODS FOR RESEARCHING GENDER NORMS

Helen Cahill and Katherine Romei

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally theory has been brought to method as a tool through which to analyse data. However, as Coleman (2014, p. 280) has argued, there has been a mismatch between theory and method, with innovation in methods and analysis lagging behind acceleration in the development of theory. Coleman and Ringrose (2013) urge attention to the 'performativity' of method and the ways in which "social science methodologies not only describe the worlds they observe but (at least in part) are involved in the invention or creation of the world." (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 1). In this they point to the relationship between method and knowledge creation. Renold (2018) also draws attention to the potential for research encounters to influence the worlds that they are investigating. She notes that "arts-based practices that encourage some form of experiential engagement…have the potential to ignite inventiveness" (Renold, 2018, p. 39).

We have a similar interest in the intersection between arts-based methods and transformative knowledge creation. As such this report discusses the use of poststructuralist and feminist theory to inform the design of methods for engaging respondents in critical thought about how gender norms influence behaviour. It describes the use of metaphors used to open discussions about the workings of gender norms. Our use of metaphor is influenced by the work of Betty St. Pierre, who highlights the use of figurations as a holding form through which to interrupt dominant binaries which tend to be preserved through linguistic practices and to manage complexity in research writing (St. Pierre, 1997). It is also informed by our experience in the use of genre-shifts within performative arts-based methods through which we have noted that research narratives presented in the naturalistic mode tend to presume and reinforce linear storylines of cause and effect (Cahill, 2012). In contrast however, narrative forms which invite use of metaphor or work within surrealist narrative traditions more readily permit respondents to encompass complexity within their narratives, and provide a more conducive territory within which to describe multiplicity of intersecting causes and effects (Cahill, 2014).

This paper describes some of the embodied arts-informed methods we selected for use in the early part of a 4-day multi-country consultation workshop convened to explore the contextual and cultural suitability of Connect with Respect – a school-related gender-based violence prevention program developed by the authors for UNESCO[1].

Given that our broader intent in the consultation workshop was to position participants as co-creators of knowledge that they would use in their work of social change, we identify that participatory action research (PAR) provides a 'host' methodology, or an overarching home for our endeavour. This is because PAR is a method committed to ensuring that "ordinary people address common needs arising in their daily lives and, in the process, generate knowledge" (Park, 2001, p. 81). Our emphasis was thus on the involvement of the stakeholders themselves in "studying, reframing, and reconstructing social practices" through collective enquiry, action and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563). The overall goal of a research encounter within the PAR tradition is that it produces both increased capacity and increased preparedness to act to address the issue of concern. We were thus keen to find research methods that could in themselves contribute to building the capacity of the participants to lead deep conversations about the socially constructed nature of gender within their future activity as educators and trainers. In addition, previous research had established that effective approaches to gender education should include learning activities which assist people to examine gender norms and stereotypes (Cahill, Coffey, Wyn, & Beadle, 2015) and the ways in which social norms influence attitudes, behaviour and wellbeing (Gleeson, Kearney, Leung, & Brislane, 2015; Whitaker et al., 2006). Thus, our challenge was to find research methods which positioned the participants to engage critically with the shaping nature of gender as a social force.

METHODS IN ACTION

In the first of examples discussed here, our choice of method is informed by Butler's theory of the performativity of gender (Butler, 2004). It works from Butler's theory that gender is both embodied and performative in nature, being "a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing…" (Butler, 2004, p. 1). In order to focus on gender as something that bodies 'do', we invited our participants to embody a museum of statues depicting the contributions of men and women through the ages. One half of the group was invited to represent statues of men, while the remaining participants represented women. Each group presented their collection of statues to the others. The embodied images were then 'read' by the opposing group. As such participants were positioned not only to show and tell, but also to interpret this embodied data, responding to questions including:

- *What are the bodies doing, signalling or showing?*
- *What storylines are evoked?*
- *What similiarities and differences are there between depictions of the past and present?*
- *What does this tell us about our own readings of gender?*
- *Was there anything missing in the representations?*

In the discussion that followed, participants made observations about the embodiments. They observed that men were consistently depicted in powerful, aggressive stances in which they occupied substantial space. In contrast, women were

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depicted in postions representing various forms of care and service or as pre-occupied by physical appearance. Their bodies were more closed than open, and made efforts to occupy less space. In this, the gender statues closely mirrored Judith Butler's theory of gender as constructed through a "repetion of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 46). In the following discussions, they came to recognise this as they drew comparisons between the statues and the ways in which gender norms were perfomed and reproduced in their settings.

The participants then worked in groups to construct an image of the preferred status of women (or men) in the 10 year future of their country. They played back these images for interpretation by their peers. Their images showed a shift in the roles and relative positionings of men and women, and in the following discussion, these 'preferred futures' came to represent the change agenda they were committed to forwarding through their school-based interventions.

In the second of the examples we discuss here, our choice of method is informed by Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge and governmentality (Foucault, 1988). We use two games to engage participants with an understanding of power as existing in relations, and to open conversations about subjectification, or the ways in which discourses, norms, categories and gender expectations are internalised and played out by members of a dynamic and self-sustaining system of power relations. We used two games as the basis for comparison for different possible relational positionings of men and women.

We used first the **Mirror Game** wherein participants work in pairs, taking turns to lead and aiming to produce between them a mirror and its reflection, such that the movements of the leader are simultaneously enacted by the follower. The structure of the game required players to closely attend to each other as they ongoingly work at what can be made possible within the dual act. To prompt thinking about the type of power relations evoked within that the game, participants are asked:

* *What was it like to be the leader and the reflection?*
* *What work of exchange happened between you?*
* *How does that game remind you of the ways in which relationships can play out between women and men?*

Using the metaphor of the game, participants were invited to discuss reciprocity, exchange, leadership, followership and attending within gender relationships.

Participants were then asked to play **Robot and Controller game** and draw a comparison between the two games. In this game, one partner is the Controller, and other the Robot. The Robot must keep their nose equidistant from the outstretched palm of the Controller's hand. Where the hand goes, the Robot must follow. After the game, participants were asked:

* *What is it like to be the Controller, versus the Robot?*
* *What work of exchange happened between you?*
* *How was this different from the Mirror game?*
* *What kinds of relationships does this game remind you of?*
* *What can you see in this game that has something to do with gender relations?*

Participants used the metaphor of the Robot and Controller game to talk about the impact of unequal power in relationships and the dis-connective and de-humanising effects that can happen when people do not attend to the ethics of their power or influence. Using the metaphors of the game, participants noted the dehumanising effect upon the 'robot' as they lost focus on the self, whilst under the dominance of the other. They were then able to compare the game with the ways in which how power relations are exhibited in micro acts within homes and workplaces. They used the metaphor of the game to describe what can happen when one party has a high level of power over another – a typical loss of attention to the rights, needs and overall dehumanisation of the less powerful party in the relationship, and described how the game could symbolise the impact of unequal power relations between the genders.

In thinking through the games, participants were able to recognise the operations of power as existing in relations. This interrupted the binary notion of powerful-powerless and oppressor-oppressed that can dominate conversations about gender relations. Through the game, they identified that power is present in all relationships and that when shared and used respectfully, it can be a productive and positive force. The metaphors of the games thus invited recognition of power as existing in a fluid and dynamic relation between people. They helped to conjure the notion that a person can be both subjected and have internalised and become complicit with their subjection, whilst also striving to preserve independence and dignity. The binary is crossed because the game permits the dual occupancy of these supposedly opposing states.

The metaphors housed within the games provide deterritorialised thinking spaces within which to think about power as operating through ongoing and fluid relations. As the participants worked together to create, and interpret these metaphors, they generated a shared language and set of concepts through which to discuss how power is understood and negotiated in their own cultural worlds. These discussions then formed the platform upon which to consult further about the suitability of the learning activities within the Connect with Respect resource within their broader initiatives towards the prevention of school-related gender-based violence.

CONCLUSION

St. Pierre works from poststructural and Deleuzian theory to argue that in research metaphors or figurations can be used to "help us to think against the prescribed narratives of humanist science" which tend to prescribe things in terms of binary opposites (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 280). The playful methods described here use metaphors as frame to evoke thinking, hold complexity, and invite and enable critical thinking about complex concepts relating to the social construction of gender. They provide opportunity to build a shared language for discussion. They position participants to look at cultural patterns relating to gender construction, rather than the particulars of their personal biographies. As such they elicit a different kind of storying from that which is derived from the individual interview, and open ways to make thinking with theory tools accessible for research participants.

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BEING AN INSIDER RESEARCHER EXPLORING TEACHERS' PRACTICE IN YOUTH JUSTICE SETTINGS

Brigitte Rogan

Insider research is characterised by the researcher being a member of the organisation or group which is the subject of study. It has become increasingly common in recent decades, particularly in education and the social sciences (Brannick & Coghlan 2007; Greene 2014). Considering the more traditional role of the researcher as the 'objective' outsider, the epistemology and methodological implications of insider research have been explored in response to criticisms of a lack of intellectual rigor and the conflict arising from role duality. Neilson and Repstad (1993) describe it as a journey from nearness to distance – and back. It directly confronts more commonly assumed positioning of the researcher as being objective, one step removed and free from bias. Conducting research in a setting where the researcher is a member, or 'insider,' affords unique advantages however also necessitates a strong awareness of, and reflection on, the methodological and ethical risks that can arise throughout the research process.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In 2014, I began teaching at a newly formed specialist government school within custodial youth justice centres in Victoria. I went to work at this school with no previous interest in youth justice, or in the justice system more broadly. I was drawn in by a principal with a reputation for strong leadership and a commitment to students who find themselves on the margins of the education system. I was eager to learn, it just happened to involve working in a prison. I have now taught at the school for over 5 years and have been fortunate enough to work with a large number of exceptional teachers, within a number of roles that have helped me to survey the lay of the land in the complex landscape of youth justice. I have also experienced the search for the 'right' situated practice model in a unique school which has undergone rapid expansion in its first five years.

In my Masters project I used reflective practitioner methodology and appreciative inquiry to explore the fostering of a growth mindset for a number of young people I taught while they were in custody. This project took an unexpected turn when the reflective process led to a greater understanding of my own practice, particularly in how it had shifted and transformed as a result of disruption and conflict. Subsequently, my interest turned to the exploration of evolving teacher practices in contexts requiring a critical approach to pedagogy. My PhD project is focused on exploring how teachers' social justice beliefs mediate the development of their practice with young people in custody.

Teachers who espouse a commitment to social justice enact their understanding of what is 'good,' 'just' and in the best interests of their students, in very different ways. They often have divergent understandings of what they are striving for (Zollers, Albert, Cochran-Smith 2000) and there are many pedagogical approaches which claim social justice agendas. Since the early 1990s there have been ongoing efforts to incorporate ideas of social justice into teacher education (Cochran-Smith 2010).

The relationship between teachers' understandings of social justice and their practice is an underexamined area within this broader agenda (Mills & Ballantyne 2016). Among teachers who express a commitment to social justice principles, there is an oft highlighted disconnect between this and translation into practice (Cross, Mills & Gale 2018). Building on the work of Gale, Mills and Cross (2017), who proposed a model of socially inclusive teaching, the aim of this study is to explore the relationship between teachers' evolving beliefs, design and actions in their work with young people in custody. My participants will be teachers from across the school, who will participate in consultative focus groups, full day observations and semi-structured interviews. These participants are also my colleagues, in some cases my friends. The task ahead is for me to understand how to navigate the multiple 'hats' I will need to alternate between during my project – and to anticipate some of the conflicts that may arise in this process.

CHOOSING TO BE AN INSIDER RESEARCHER

I had initially planned to use my school as only one of several possible research sites in the study, primarily because I am more interested in understanding transformational responses to educational marginalisation than I am in understanding prisons. Six months into my candidature the uniqueness of my in-depth knowledge of, and familiarity with, this research setting was highlighted by my supervisory panel. I was asked why I would not focus my research solely on a setting which is ordinarily difficult for the research community to access? While I intuitively understood the merits of this, my initial concerns centred on delineation of my role as a teacher, a colleague, a researcher and a student.

After conversations with colleagues, and a delve into the literature on insider research, I decided to reframe my position and experience within the school as an opportunity, rather than a barrier, to research integrity. I made this decision knowing it would require a high level of ongoing and deep reflexivity to explicitly bring to light how my positionality was impacting on my data collection and interpretation. There are four distinguishing dynamics of insider research; access, preunderstanding, role duality and managing organisational politics (Coghlan & Brannick 2007). Each of these dynamics present possibilities and opportunities, as well as limitations, risks and potential conflicts.

NEW POSSIBILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES: EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS AND PREUNDERSTANDING

Once I had made the decision to conduct insider research, I soon realised there were methodological options available that I had not previously considered and which would allow me to maintain fidelity to my preference for doing research 'with' rather than 'on' people. Choosing the path of insider research has led me to integrate a number of elements into my methods which I believe will enhance authenticity, transparency and depth in the study. For example, I will run a series of dialogic focus groups where participants will have the opportunity to provide feedback on the research design prior to data collection and to learn about the decision-making process I have gone through as a researcher. As a white, middle class, heterosexual woman inquiring about people's understanding of social justice I am acutely aware that my methods have been informed by my own understanding of how I would best articulate this, as well as by the relative comfort I feel in discussing issues of social injustice. I have greater confidence, than I would in an unknown setting with unknown teachers, that participants who are known to me will feel a greater level of comfort in providing honest feedback. I also expect that my own vulnerability will be higher amongst a participant group who are also trusted colleagues.

In recent years at the school, I have taken on roles in teacher coaching, supervision, professional development and the introduction of external partners to the school. These experiences have afforded me an insight into how people become familiar with a maximum-security environment which is for most, a foreign landscape. For teachers new to this setting, it ordinarily takes them a few months to understand how to navigate the social, structural and operational facets of a maximum-security youth justice facility. Navigating the psychological and emotional landscape is ongoing. I have had the experience of trying to convey to researchers and external stakeholders the nature of teaching young people in a prison-like setting. It is time intensive and is inevitably limited by the absence of experiential insight. Some aspects are easier than others. For example, you can explain why teachers focus on literacy development above a more advanced academic curriculum by using student standardised data. And why doing this is not the same as holding low expectations. However, it is more difficult to pick up an important glance between a teacher and a youth justice worker during a moment of tension. Or to understand why teachers shaking students' hands as they walk into class may be used to determine how they begin the class. Or how teachers base their feedback content and delivery on knowledge of the student over knowledge of the curriculum. Or why teachers may consider a particular student walking into the room, swearing, picking up a book and sitting at the back of the classroom an enormous success. Or how it feels to watch one of your students being restrained in class because they find it difficult to self-regulate.

While understanding these scenarios from my own standpoint creates bias and potential blind spots (Asselin 2003), this level of preunderstanding affords me a position of authenticity in guiding dialogues about the development of teachers' practice. In addition to this the requirement for contextual explanation on the part of participants is significantly reduced. While I will inevitably make assumptions, the assumptions I make will be based on a knowledge of the context and a close scrutiny of how my subjectivity is driving them. Without this 'preunderstanding', there is much ground that needs to be covered in this context before the real conversation can begin.

CONSIDERING LIMITATIONS, RISKS AND CONFLICTS: BIAS AND ROLE DUALITY

While existing relationships and preunderstanding can enhance the richness and depth of data, they can also compromise research integrity. Drake (2010) notes that researchers' relational proximity to their setting may inhibit their ability to engage critically with their participants and data. There are two aspects of this which I feel most compelled to counter.

Firstly, I need to consider how preunderstandings which are based on *my* experiences of teaching in this context will lead me to make assumptions that do not reflect or do justice to the stories of my participants. This could occur during interviews, by glossing over a comment that warrants questioning and elaboration because of assumptions I am making. Or during data analysis where some sentiments, narratives and vignettes will inevitably resonate more than others based on similarity or significant difference from my own experiences. There are a number of methods for insider research aimed at building in the reflexivity necessary to counteract this and increase validity. These include being interviewed by a peer, keeping a reflective journal, speaking with others about your experiences (Van Heugten 2004), thick description through detailed note taking and member checking (Greene 2014). I have integrated all of these into my research design.

Secondly, there is an element of inherent conflict in decision making in insider research stemming from role duality (Taylor 2011). As a researcher balancing accountabilities to the community under study, the academic community and personal and professional relationships, I can see the potential for the disclosure of information during data collection which requires careful consideration. For example, if a participant who was also a close colleague disclosed ongoing conflict with their team leader during an interview. When ethics in practice issues such as this arise, as they inevitably will, I will rely on consultation with my supervisors to guide my responses.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Conducting insider research with integrity is only possible through deep and continual reflexivity, particularly in relation to the nature of shifting boundaries (Mauthner & Doucet 2003). As Taylor (2011) notes, the boundaries of insider/ outsider positioning are always permeable. Access to pre-existing relationships and contextual understanding are elements which have the potential to both enhance and detract from the validity of my research. Without critical awareness of the assumptions I am making, the stories I tell will end up being my own – and not those of my participants. And without a proactive approach to navigating dual roles, balancing accountability to my colleagues and to the research community will be difficult. Since commencing my study, I spend much less time at school and I have been surprised at the rate of change which was previously invisible to me. It is foreseeable that by the conclusion of my research I will be questioning if I can still consider myself to be an 'insider.'

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