### Title:
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### Journal:
Journal of Youth Studies

### ISSN:
1367-6261

### Year:
2013

### Pages:
986 - 999

### Volume:
16

### Issue:
8

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Abstract

Participatory methodologies are increasingly employed in research with young people. These practices stem from a desire to reduce problematic distributions of power in research and to construct knowledge with young people rather than for them. This paper examines research conducted with a small group of young people experiencing exclusion from school, which aimed to understand those experiences and their implications for education. The research took a poststructural, critical approach, engaging in performances of praxis, and examined the methodological processes of the research as well as the issues of power in education that the work set out to scrutinize. An account of the ways in which discursive contexts of academic research itself and institutions like secondary education can influence opportunities for participation are presented. The paper describes the ways in which performances of power emerged, from a researcher position finding barriers and conventional assumptions difficult to resist, and from a young person position, successfully resisting inherently problematic practices. The paper raises serious questions about our understandings of participatory research and its widespread adoption with young people.

Keywords: participation; young people; resistance; praxis; power; discourse

Background literature

In the broad field of qualitative methods, the power held by academia and researchers in research produced and thus knowledge constructed has increasingly been questioned. From a poststructural perspective, constructing knowledge which maintains status quo and promotes the problematic practices research should be aiming to challenge is rightly seen as inherently inappropriate. In response, research carried out with young people has progressively drawn upon versions of participation in an attempt to involve young people in
informing and transforming research practices (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010, Bostock and Freeman, 2003, Foster-Fishman et al., 2010, Holland et al., 2010, Vromen and Collin, 2010). While much research with young people claims to be collaborative the concept of participation is sometimes poorly theorised and the practice can appear tokenistic (see expansion of this critique in: Malone and Hartung, 2010, Van Vlaenderen and Neves, 2004).

Participatory methodologies offer opportunities for accessing experiences and knowledge with young people that is less hindered by adult, dominant concerns (Dentith et al., 2009). This idea is somewhat reflected in the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which includes the right of children and young people to participate in decisions that affect them (1989, Article 12). Theory draws from concepts of dialogical interaction described by Freire (1970), and conscientisation as collective consciousness raising – where all involved, researcher included, are experiencing conscientisation (Smith et al., 1997). Lansdown (2001), notes that dominant assumptions of young people centre around them being incompetent, deviant and in need of control (see also Akom et al., 2008, Katz, 1995, Treseder, 1995, Fox, 2007). These assumptions have been increasingly questioned, and understanding has grown that children and young people are capable and competent in determining their lives and informing and transforming decisions which affect them (Lansdown, 1995). In line with these challenges to dominant assumptions about young people are moves away from problematic notions of ‘helping’ which require subject positions of vulnerability, towards notions of enablement and agency which aim to empower (Parker, 2005, Dentith et al., 2009). In his ‘ladder of participation’, Hart (1997) describes a number of ‘levels’ (p.41). For Hart non-participation is distinguished by manipulation or tokenism, with consultation, adult-initiated shared decision making, and child initiated and directed research, being graduations which may be employed. While participatory methodologies
offer possibilities of emancipatory, transformative, radical research, much of the research carried out with young people that claims to be participatory in fact often retains the aforementioned dominant assumptions about young people which can be argued to be inherently problematic. In investigating participatory research practices, Vromen and Collin (2010) find research often claims to be participatory, but aims to ‘develop skills’ in young people, to ‘train’ young people in research methods, or worse, to ‘create citizens’, by guiding young people into being the kinds of citizens society wants. Work by Sharpe (2012) for example, explicitly aims to ‘train’ young people, thus teaching conventional research practices which participation should be aiming to avoid. Foster-Fishman et al. (2010), claim that the young people they worked with were not able to adequately carry out analysis using the methods the research employed; rather than concluding the methods were at fault. Research like this cannot claim to be exploring young people’s experiences from their standpoint, nor can it make recommendations or transformations that substantially challenge rather than succumb to the status quo.

The institutional context of academic research itself is rarely examined in published research: one process of that context is ethics. The use of participatory methodology potentially draws upon a deep understanding of ethics that requires research to be inherently respectful and view those immersed in the lived experiences of an issue, i.e. young people experiencing life as a young person, as subjective experts (Rodríguez and Brown, 2009, Fleming and Boeck, 2012). Ethical guidelines do not always reflect theoretical understandings of young people as competent expert social actors (Chabot et al., 2012, Coyne, 2010, Kirk, 2007, Morrow, 2008). Morrow (2008) argues the need for rigorous ethics which take into account relations of power and ways in which adults and adult systems do not always act in the best interests of children and young people. The development of ethical
guidelines in research has emerged from a medicalised position and an adult one however, one consequence of which has been the emphasis on powerful gatekeepers of young people’s involvement. Skelton (2008) argues that adult gatekeeping (parents, teachers, schools) involves consent from an adult who already has some form of social power over the young person (p.22). Firstly, this process in ethical consent can, deliberately or inadvertently, serve to exclude some young people from research and thus exacerbate issues of powerlessness and voicelessness, as adults make choices about who should and should not participate in research (see expansion of this critique in: Chabot et al., 2012, Coyne, 2010). Secondly, these adult centric procedures raise significant challenges for participatory research which aims, while still engaging deeply in ethical practices, to reflect understandings of competence in young people.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that much published research appears too adult led, engaging in methods which adults find manageable and that they feel young people will be able to ‘handle’ (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010, Holland et al., 2010). Most researchers or community workers have experienced training in formal, traditional research methods and perhaps as a result techniques to research ‘with’ young people tend towards ‘formal participation mechanisms’ (Vromen and Collin, 2010, p. 97). Malone and Hartung (2010) argue that formal processes inhibit organic participation. For young people and indeed for other groups and communities experiencing social exclusion, formal experiences may be the very thing they wish to resist. Many pieces of research rely on activities or data collection that are too similar to school or formal tasks, like worksheets or discussion and writing. These rely on particular experiences of school for young people (and adults) where they have been privy to a successful experience of formal school education. It also privileges young people from social groups which are aligned with the context and nature of a formal western
education. Those who are familiar with debating skills, writing of reports and traditional data collection techniques will find it far easier to take part. Vromen and Collin suggest that as a result participatory research with young people often leads to only certain kinds of young people being targeted.

The research described in the following sections does not claim to offer a better example of participatory research. Rather it presents a particular critical approach to carrying out research, which opened up some opportunities for the young people involved to ‘answer back’: simultaneously it reflects upon the ideological, discursive, and subjective barriers which limited participation. This paper gets to grips, as transparently as possible, with the difficulties in carrying out meaningful participation and examines barriers and limitations, drawing from a piece of research carried out with young people that aimed for participation.

**Description of the research**

**Epistemological and methodological positions**

The research described here was part of a PhD project examining power and school exclusion in Secondary Education in Scotland (Fox, 2008). There was a desire from the outset to use the opportunity of a relatively longer timeframe and the comparative freedom afforded by PhD work, to attempt difficult, transformative practice that could construct knowledge from a critical, extensively theorised position, which was simultaneously grounded in collaborative actions with young people. The focus of interest for the work was a deep concern for the socially unjust phenomenon of experiencing exclusion from learning and from one’s peers and community. This issue of school exclusion seemed ‘unfair’, but it also seemed easily blamed upon the individual behaviours of young people, their families and communities: rarely the educational discursive context in which they are positioned. Given
the voiceless and depowered nature of these young people’s experiences it seemed vital to try to engage in methodologies that operated differently, but it was assumed this would be difficult to achieve and that powerful institutional discourses are hard to resist.

Carrying out meaningful research with people fundamentally requires the research methodologies to complement and reflect epistemological assumptions, subject positions of those involved and the topic of inquiry (Parker, 2005). Carrying out research from a social constructionist standpoint, with young people, in relation to forms of social exclusion would not be complemented by positivist assumptions and experimental methodology; much of which also emerges in conventional qualitative research. An epistemological approach to knowledge informed by poststructuralism meant that the research aimed to expose problematic assumptions (in research processes as well as education), and interrogate relations of power (Butin, 2006, Foucault, 1978/1997, Parker, 2005). This research did not view participation simply as a method or technique, but rather as a methodological principle to be aimed for. It assumed from the outset that collaboration with young people is extremely difficult to meaningfully achieve, that subject positions of researcher and researched are hard to overcome, and that institutional discourses create barriers and limitations to doing radical research (Fox, 2007). A particular form of praxis which aims for the continual simultaneous practice of critical reflection alongside action and experience, constructing and reconstructing knowledge as the process unfolds was fundamental to the research (Fryer and Laing, 2008). While the topic of school exclusion and secondary education was largely adhered to, the exploratory approach in fact led to quite a different account of power and exclusion by the end of the research process; an account which would not have emerged without the involvement of the young people described here.
Methods

This paper focuses on a piece of research where participatory methods were attempted, with a small group of 4 young people who were experiencing exclusion from secondary school in Scotland. The young men, aged 14-15 years, had been excluded from their school (for reasons commonly termed as ‘social, emotional and behavioural’), and were attending the local youth project to receive full time education on a tailored programme which involved intensive learning in core skills like literacy, numeracy and IT. Permission was granted from their school to meet with the young people for one afternoon a week for the whole academic year. The sessions were designed to be exploratory and collaborative, to discuss and problematise issues and enable space to progressively engage in conscientising, dialogical critique (Freire, 1970). It was hoped sessions toward the end of the year could explore experiences of education and school exclusion. In the event the young people agreed this would be suitable and final sessions were audio recorded (sessions prior were unrecorded, but detailed field notes were kept). In summary, the research with these young people included an extensive period of ethnography and field note taking, ending with six sessions lasting 1-2 hours which were audio recorded and involved informal discussion around experiences of education and school exclusion (no detailed topic guide was used). These six sessions primarily involved discussion and problem posing, but also included drawings, artwork and activity sheets.

The participatory research was part of the larger PhD project, involving: ethnography in three school settings; further research with young people experiencing exclusion; research with staff; and collection of textual materials from national, local and school levels. While this work is not described here, it is important to note that analysis of the ‘participatory’ sessions for their implications for research and education were not done in isolation, but
rather had a context of ethnographic material from mainstream schooling which informed what is presented here. Analysis across all research material involved a version of critical Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis at a number of levels of the institutional discursive practices that make school exclusion and problematic performances of power and control possible (Parker, 1992, Willig, 2008). The process of constructing knowledge during this Foucauldian-informed analysis involved an examination of meanings, objects and subjects produced in discourse, “upon whom and through which particular relations of power are realised” (Graham, 2005, p.4). It included a critical approach to performing reflexivity, and a fuller consideration of the way in which findings are mediated by the discourses of research as an institution. This last aspect made it possible to analyse for and challenge assumptions embedded in research practices which are now presented here.

**Ethics**

The tensions between ethical procedures and the ethics of meaningfully involving young people in research emerged right at the outset. Permission had to be sought from the school before meeting the young people: given the school had excluded the young people this is a problematic position for collaborative work to start from. Methods used to collect research material for the year long sessions were not designed at the outset, but instead broad possibilities of recording and data collection were ethically applied for. This was an attempt to resist as far as possible the tension between voluntary participation of young people and the gate keeping practices of adult led institutions: the issue that young people could not be involved in the early planning stages (or indeed in setting the research question) remained. Consent for the young people to take part primarily involved them signing agreements. Parental consent was structured in the form of a letter which parents were required to sign if they did not wish their son to take part; an ‘opt out’ format, and the young people took charge
of this process by taking the letters to parents themselves. Despite this, ethical practices which are assumed to promote ‘safety’, served to depower these young people from the outset.

**Account of the research process and experiences with the young people**

What follows is an account of the research process that examines some of the issues raised in relation to participatory methodologies. Much of the materials presented are descriptions of the sessions which draw upon the recordings and detailed fieldwork notes. It is difficult to include quotes about participation given it was not directly discussed: direct excerpts are included where possible.

**Relationships informed by context and power**

This first section considers some of the tensions which can occur around recorded research sessions. The account is a narrative of interactions, drawing primarily from fieldwork diaries, and describes some of the minute everyday influences of systems of power on our relationships. This is a subjective narrative and only one account of the work which aims to raise questions, rather than recount truths or intentions of those involved. The narrative is not taken from one time period of the ethnography: our relationships evolved, and simultaneously understandings of the way these relationships were mediated and constituted evolved. The account here is therefore a kind of ‘meta-narrative’ which is not intended to present what occurred at a particular point in time, but rather what seems to emerge as pertinent. While the young people significantly informed this account by their challenges to me and their resistances to problematic practices, they were not afforded direct input into this narrative and it is important therefore to make transparent its limitations.
The research sessions, one afternoon a week, would start after a long lunch break, but I would arrive beforehand so I had time to see the staff and prepare for the session. The staff would often talk to me soon after I arrived about how the young people had behaved in the morning, and this would sometimes be negative: the intensity of the programme and their relationship with the young people made it difficult to critically reflect and conventional or blaming ways of speaking emerged under stress. If events had been conveyed to me in this way I would feel worried about the coming afternoon session. Alternatively if the staff felt positive then I would feel hopeful: both these reactions had an impact on the ways I communicated with the young people. The following diary entry from one of the earlier sessions demonstrates this process:

When I got there the staff were really fed up with the young people. They just felt they didn’t want to do anything, that they were lazy and wanted to get out of work or wind up the staff – both of whom are genuinely patient… So, instead of a long talk I was going to have, I began by being quite forceful (Fieldwork Diary Entry from week 6).

Here the language towards the young people is very negative and blaming, and rhetorical discourse positions the staff paradoxically in a positive light, justifying the account I suggest they had conveyed. The entry went on to speak of the regret I had felt afterwards in moving to this more authoritarian position, which seemed to be mediated by the staff-young people relationships.

The performance between the young people and I would often start immediately – I might be probing as to how they were feeling, how the week was going, and they in turn might be probing for information about the sessions. Often this initial discussion would seem to be a way for the young people to test out my expectations. Ways of speaking involving a
negotiation of ‘work’, would often emerge. They would want to know what we were doing that afternoon, what the topic was, how much work would have to be done, and most importantly what activity we would be doing afterwards and for how long. At this stage a young person agenda might emerge and a negotiation would begin. They might indicate for example that they were not going to do any ‘work’. Or they might indicate that they would work harder, if I booked the football pitch at the leisure centre for them for activity time later on. In many respects these initial tests of expectation and statements of intention by the young people and me would set the tone for the afternoon – sometimes in positive ways, but if any conflict had occurred it would usually lead me to feeling anxious and guarded.

It is particularly important to note, that prior even to arriving I often had preconceptions that would affect my experience of the situation and this emerges as a significant problem for a researcher attempting participatory work. I would have spent a lot of time in reflection on how I could improve the sessions: this is further promoted by the accepted practice of maintaining a fieldwork diary. I reflected upon how I might change myself the next time, or what topic or material might grab the young people’s attention more. At the same time I would try and prepare for every eventuality, both with material (such as creative ideas), and with reflection about possible interactions. One could argue that these reflections allowed me to be more prepared, and indeed the aim was to be as flexible and as open as possible to anything the young people wanted to do. On the other hand however, it meant that with so much preparation gone into each session, I naturally felt invested in the sessions and had much more to lose. No matter how much a researcher may be aware of this phenomenon, it is still very hard to overcome. My idea of how I thought the session should go, things I thought would be good to do or negative things I feared might happen, inevitably impacted on how much I felt a need to be in control of the situation. In this way, the assumed
position of an ethnographic researcher, who must think carefully about every aspect of the research process, produces an individual in a so-called participatory group who has thought and planned far more than other members of that group, not to mention the structural ways in which a researcher has a great deal to lose or gain from research. I can offer no direct ‘evidence’ of what extent the young people thought about and planned for the sessions (quite possibly in valid ways which are negated by formal research assumptions): they certainly had little to ‘lose’. However, I would argue that the level of planning and reflection expected of a researcher sets up disparity. This also produces blaming and individualising conceptions of the researcher, who is assumed to ‘solve problems’ and reflect by themselves on the ways forward. In this way dominant assumptions of control in research and positivist notions of individual selves are reproduced while structural discursive contexts remain hidden.

While there were times where discussions were rich and dialogical once the sessions began, our interactions emerged often at odds with desires for participation, and the next section highlights instances where institutional power became difficult to resist.

_Institution as context_

In this research the actual setting where I met with the young people was a building away from their school where the young people were attending full time having been excluded from mainstream education. In this sense the setting initially seemed to be removed from education and operated in ways classrooms do not. The space was smaller and intimate with a very small group of young people (four) and a number of staff (two or three). The daily structure was less formal: the young people could develop their own plan of work, get up and make tea and coffee, go to the toilet without asking and the space generally offered more of an office feel and therefore a more adult space. In these ways the space and its less
formal practices opened up some possibilities for interaction in research that a more formal classroom context might not.

However, what quickly became apparent about this seemingly informal space for learning was how much formal educational discourse still seeped in. Attendance was still compulsory; ‘politeness’ was encouraged; swearing discouraged and set curricular work had to be followed by the young people for them to be in with a chance of gaining formal school qualifications. Perhaps even more significantly than those structures, performances and discourses which emerged in the setting demonstrated a clear influence of education and systems of hierarchy. In particular, discursive assumptions held by both the adults and young people about how ‘teachers’ and ‘students’ speak and act, seemed to emerge powerfully and make alternative ways of working difficult, not just during their learning activities and but also during our research sessions.

The extent to which this context made participation in the research process difficult can be demonstrated in the parallels between policy and my language use at the time. The following is a section of policy describing unacceptable behaviours in schools:

[Negative] classroom behaviours encountered by school staff… [are] low level, in particular ‘talking out of turn’, ‘making unnecessary (non-verbal) noise’, ‘hindering or distracting others’ and ‘pupils leaving their seat without permission’ (Scottish Executive, 2006).

Here the emphasis on actions which can be critiqued for its constricting and authoritarian nature can then be seen in my words used with the young people during recorded sessions:

I: Just calm down, act your age
I: Well if you’re not gonna listen to the story, are you ready? Then I shall begin.

I: I’m gonna be asking questions at the end, I’m gonna be asking questions at the end, if you don’t know what was in.. am I gonna have to take your phone off you.. do you want to put your phone over there Raul, by the window (various points during Session 3).

These extracts demonstrate my attempts to stop the young people from being excited, from speaking, and from making noises with their mobile phones, similar to the ‘unnecessary’ noises described in policy. Given I was aiming to perform as a critical participatory researcher, these instances of traditional adult or ‘teacher’ ways of speaking emerge as unexpected utterances which make them all the more important. As well as the sessions not needing to be led using disciplinary classroom forms of discourse, they also did not need to have a curricular focus. We did not need to produce worksheets, pieces of writing, ‘homework’: the exploratory, dialogical desires for the process meant that anything that happened during a session was likely to be useful in the long run. Despite this, both I and the young people found ourselves constructing sessions to include ‘school work’. When unsure of what to suggest next, I would tend towards suggesting more formal productions of knowledge, like writing or worksheets. The young people would also at times characterise anything, even conversations we were having as ‘work’; work which they understood (often because it was) to be just like the school work they had experienced, and that the well practiced strategies for resisting and not doing that ‘work’ must be employed:

“We are not doing any work today” (Inscribed on a drawing made during Session 6)

The institutional discursive space of education was therefore a very difficult context for us to operate differently within. The institutional discourses of research also made
participation and dialogical interaction difficult and in the next section these difficulties reveal problematic assumptions which create tension for participatory work.

**Research as context**

In the context of traditional mainstream research, constructing knowledge claims even from mainstream qualitative data is often positioned as a less valid way to conduct research. Producing knowledge claims which do not come from audio recorded ‘interviews’ or formally observed and documented sessions can be considered even more specious. Were these concerns completely absent from sessions like these the experience would perhaps have been richer. Conversations over a game of pool where recordings did not need to be negotiated might have resulted in far fewer conflicts. For these young people, and indeed any group experiencing exclusion from society, formal research practices look like any other formal institutional context. It follows then that the work described here found these young people expertly resisting the formal practices of research which look so similar to the classroom practices of education. Added to this the unbalanced nature of the investment for the researcher over and above the investment for the young people and *the institutional context of research itself constructs problems for participatory methodology*. These problematic, taken for granted core assumptions produce ways of speaking and being in the research setting that make it more likely that the researcher will need to draw upon coercion and persuasion, subtle forms of control to achieve these goals expected in academia.

My role during sessions and with the young people was deliberately one where I attempted to disrupt conventional relations of power: I certainly had less power than school teachers and little experience of the ways in which control could be exerted; no ‘sleight of hand’ (Willis, 1977). While sometimes this gave me the opportunity to think differently to a teacher, other times it ill equipped me for thinking critically, and drew me into using as
sophisticated ‘teacher’ strategies as I could muster. As such during sessions and in diary entries, I tended to attempt to rationalise to myself and to the young people using problematic dominant arguments. This can be seen in the following extract, when the young people perform heightened instances of resistance and I communicate this reasoning:

I: You can do something together or you can do different stuff, but you are going to do something. For a start it’s not fair on Robert and Craig if they’re doing work and you’re not. But it’s also part of your curriculum and something you need to do and it’s not that painful to be honest I’m not asking you to, do difficult sums, or, write an essay, I’m just asking you to think a little bit about, issues about school. (Session 5)

In this extract I make a very controlling statement from the outset, but I then go on to use words such as ‘fair’, ‘not that painful’ and ‘honest’, rhetorical discourse to persuade the young people that there are logical and moral reasons why they must do as I say. As described earlier, these sessions were quite explicitly not part of the curriculum and if they had been compulsory would not be very conducive to participatory research! Interestingly, prior to this session I even decide upon this strategy and rationalise it to myself in my fieldwork diary:

I think next week I will have to see if I can be firm and have them all take part in some way – walking all over me is as unfair as me telling them what to do, I just feel like they’re taking the piss a bit – not sure if that’s my conventional adult coming through! (Fieldwork diary, written during week prior to session quoted above)

Once submerged in education, decisions came to be based on uncritical educational beliefs, rather than the assumptions of critical research. These small occurrences speak volumes about research and interactions between adults and young people. These excerpts
jump out as important because I have observed them countless times elsewhere, in conversations between adults and young people, in classrooms but also work with young people which is aiming to be participatory. I question how often projects or research are positioned as meaningful participation with young people, but simultaneously involve these problematic coercions and persuasions.

**Discussion and implications**

This paper has reflected upon the research relationship between a researcher and 4 young people. Although the desire to be participatory and critical meant that methods were employed in a different way, they still fell victim to the dominating forces of secondary education and academic research. This often led to researcher attempts to control the research and to the young people trying to resist that control. In examining the performance of these sessions what emerges is a spotlight on research which transforms understandings of power. Despite removing many conventional practices from the research, the contexts of institution and the subject positions of researcher/researched; adult/young person, made meaningful participation difficult. It is important to consider the lack of power afforded by the researcher or research within large institutional or societal contexts of which ‘academia’ is one: a lack of power which makes meaningful participation more difficult.

Structurally, formal research practices and the discursive context of traditional academia emerge as fundamental barriers to meaningful participation in research for young people. As is often discussed, ethical consent which requires permission from a variety of stakeholders (universities, education boards, schools, parents), for predesigned research prior to involvement of young people, negates the possibility of meaningful voluntary involvement. Dentith, et al. (2009), usefully position this as the institutional ‘blocking’ of participation. While it is possible to resist these systems, sending parental consent forms
home with young people for example, the system is resistant to innovative notions of informal, ongoing, fully informed consent. The requirement to produce something which looks like traditional research, some ‘data’, further distances research from the relevance of young people’s lives. The subject position of ‘researcher’ assumes expert knowledge and skill, requires the researcher to act alone, to construct knowledge which they must state is their ‘own work’; and to be hugely more invested in the life of the research than other subjects. If they remain veiled these often taken for granted positions create possibilities of ‘participatory research’ which adhere to status quo and fail to transform.

As a result micro interactions within research like the project described can be interrogated for the consequences structural contexts have on attempts at participation. The way in which these young people at times interpreted the sessions as something formal akin to ‘schoolwork’, and thus something to be resisted highlights the traditional nature of research. These young people actively resisted participating, and in doing so offer us a question: ‘participation into what’? While research continues to appear so formal and academic, groups like these young people who have resisted conforming spaces like school while simultaneously experiencing exclusion from them, will rightly continue to resist. These are surely groups we are most keen to work with, and who simultaneously most eloquently highlight our failings to do so. In this resistance of research, Foucault’s description of critique resonates: ‘if governmentalisation [or research] is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice… then critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination’ (Foucault, 1978/1997). What this research did manage to deliver was a space where the young people could resist and could challenge the researcher and in a less than expected participatory way shed light on the limiting institutional systems in which research operates. In this way this paper aims to offer
an account of *young people resisting participation*, where that resistance to the research process has been taken seriously and examined for the questions it raises for the status quo.

Participatory methodologies require careful critique, and transparency needs to exist about the social and institutional barriers which make young people’s participation difficult: questions need to be raised about the very notion of participating. Otherwise, danger lies in rhetoric which claims participation but becomes a vehicle for strengthening claims and policies which do not stem from young people’s involvement. Participation is often assumed to be a good thing and it is crucial to consider that individuals, groups and communities may have good reasons not to get involved. When questioning what young people are required to participate in, this paper argues that the majority of academic research does not shift its practices and assumptions to even meet young people half-way: young people are expected to take part in ways adults feel are appropriate and possible. Research tends more often to fit neatly within institutional systems which are inherently problematic for the groups research is engaging with. It is no surprise in these contexts that techniques remain formal and irrelevant to large sections of young society, and that findings align with existing adult assumptions about young people that centre on deviance, incompetence and the need for adult control.

Despite these difficulties, opportunities are being found for radical change of participatory practices and a fundamental shifting of the way research operates. Some of these are more practical shifts: young people strongly advocate for collaboration which is fun (something time and again positioned by adults as unimportant or even distracting) and clearly focussed on issues which are directly relevant to them (Vromen & Collin, 2010). Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010), also stress the importance for young people of new online ways of communicating (blogging, vlogging, facebook, social networks) and the use of new technologies in research.
Some of these more practical changes will not be enough however, if fundamental, underlying processes are not addressed. Both Vromen and Collin (2010) and Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010) find that participation works well for young people when it is informal, draws on everyday ways of acting and is suited to their ways of communicating and their concerns rather than policy matters. Spaces which are constantly shifting, where young people can change decisions and change decision making processes, disrupt power relations and simultaneously challenge the traditional practices of detailed research plans made months in advance. Akom, et al. (2008), argue that radical research needs to focus on creating spaces for resistance. The way forward is argued to be in non-traditional spaces:

Where young people depend on one another’s skills, perspectives, and experiential knowledge, to generate original multi-textual, youth-driven cultural products that embody a critique of oppression, a desire for social justice, and ultimately lay the foundation for community empowerment and social change. (p. 110)

Youth initiated participation, where knowledge production and social transformation are instigated, led and managed by young people is one place where these radical ambitions might be met (Dentith et al., 2012, Fleming and Boeck, 2012). While adult researchers may have a role to play in these instances, particularly in tactical ways where structures expect to communicate with adults, young people can be directing this involvement. This approach potentially requires either funding free projects or more flexible funding less focussed on traditional outcomes. It requires a very different approach to ethics, and a less structured use of researcher’s time. These different ways of conceptualising knowledge construction by young people for young people raise an interesting dilemma: far less recognition for academia, adult lead organisations and researchers employed within them.
Researchers aiming to meaningfully collaborate with young people are therefore in a difficult dilemma: practices required to achieve success in research are so often depowering for the people we are working with. This paper agrees with the predicament voiced by Dentith, Measor and O’Malley (2012): “critical, participatory research... creates dilemmas for researchers... about exclusion from funding and other academic opportunities”. There are no easy answers to this problem: meaningful participation surely requires organisational structures to change: problematic participation conversely fits into the current system and requires no changes. In conclusion, good participatory research with young people should necessarily be a threat to the existing institutional powerful forces which mediate their lives. It is no surprise then that it is the very maintaining of status quo in these institutions that poses the greatest barrier to meaningful participation. Discourses around the safety of young people and their lack of ability need to be critiqued for the way in which they serve to maintain these barriers and limit critical constructions of understandings about young people’s lives. Young people are time and again labelled deviant by adult constructions of knowledge, but conversely in their resistances offer vital insights into these problematic assumptions, which ultimately mediate the epistemologies and methodologies of research.
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