

Co-constructing Early Adolescent Education through Image-based Research

Abstract

Professional literature reporting the needs and characteristics, both educational and developmental of early adolescents presents a compelling case that students of this age group are distinct and require the development of a unique educational approach to best support their needs as learners and young people (Stewart and Nolan, 1992; Beane, 1997, 2004; Manning and Bucher, 2001; National Middle School Association, 2003). Although much has been written about these students, little has been written with them, and even fewer studies have involved students themselves as co-researchers to investigate their own experience and understandings (Atweh, Christensen, and Dornan, 1998; Cook-Sather). The research developed and implemented into practice an image-based research methodology with early adolescent students themselves constructing and articulating their voice as the core focus of the research. The research was predicated on the belief that ‘student voice’ is the element vital in an educational approach developmentally responsive to students of this age group, and an element all too often missing within schooling structures designed to privilege the perspectives, preferences and authority of adults i.e. teachers and other school personnel (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace, 1996; Cook-Sather, 2002; Beane, 2004).

Extended Visual Dialogue, the methodological approach devised to implement the research, was employed to conduct exploratory voice research with 38 early adolescent students in Years 7 and 8 (ages 11-13), across three participating New Zealand schools in 2004. The approach combined elements from the research genres of voice research (Dahl, 1995; Smyth and Hattam, 2001; Cook-Sather, 2002), participatory action research (Atweh, et al., 1998; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1989; Jones, 2004; Nieuwenhuys, 2004) and image-based research (Collier, 1967; Walker and Wiedel, 1985; Prosser, 1992; Clark, 1999; Collier, 2001; Collier and Collier, 1986; Taylor, 2002; Capello, 2005) and the students used a combination of auto-photography (Taylor, 2002) (participant-generated photography) and photo elicitation interviews (Clark, 1999; Capello, 2005) to investigate how they perceive school and learning, perceive their identity as young persons and learners, and perceive the world in which they live.

The question ‘How do early adolescent students perceive school and the learning they participate in, perceive aspects of their identity as young persons and learners, and perceive their experience of their world?’ framed the research. The research question was operationalised into nine Photo Focus Tasks that prompted the students to take photographs and construct drawings as the core data of the research. Assigning the students the first opportunity to make sense of the images they constructed through dialogue, helped also to ensure that it was their voice and unique perspective the research captured¹ (Collier, 1967). The students’ explanations of their images and perspectives recorded as interview transcripts were analysed to produce the ‘voice’ of the student cohort using a constant comparative approach (Silverman, 2005). Trustworthiness of the analysis (Silverman, 2005) was established by involving the students as advisors to the analysis of the elicitation interview data through an ongoing cycle of focus groups (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson, 2001) where the students engaged with the emergent analysis, providing clarification as necessary, until they were satisfied the analysis produced reflected authentically their perspectives and experience (Mitchell, 1983; Heron, 1996; Bray, Lee, Smith and Yorks, 2000).

Through the processes of the research progressively, the students shared their perspectives with the adult researcher and brought themselves, and the researcher, to a deeper

¹ The core underlying assumption of auto-photography is that the images individuals construct, as photographs, reflect the tacit beliefs they have about the concepts represented visually. These beliefs guide the selection of appropriate subject matter, and inform the manner in which the photograph is composed. In this way the photograph produced is a partial or full representation of the perspective of the photographer – the students - that can be explored and made explicit through a process of dialogue (Taylor, 2002).

understanding of their unique point of view as learners in our schools, and as young persons in their own right. For the students participating in the research was the first opportunity many had experienced to consider explicitly their identity as young people and learners and to share their expertise regarding their preferred ways of working and learning, knowledge of teaching strategies that best support their learning, and the concerns and agendas that dominate their lives.

The findings of the research organised using the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Development (1979, 2005) represented the ecological perspective of the students themselves and described factors that influence their learning, social interactions, aspirations and sense of wellbeing within the diverse settings of their lives. The findings, intended to function as stimulus for teachers to inform their development as distinctly middle level practitioners, insert the voice of students into the debate around the design of educational processes and programmes uniquely suited to the needs, interests and agendas of early adolescent students. In this way they constituted the first step within the participating schools towards including students as partners (albeit indirectly) alongside teachers in the design of developmentally responsive curricula and pedagogy and the development of an authentic middle schooling approach.

The students' assessment of the efficacy of the research design and methodology was as much a focus of the research as the perspectives the students shared in response to the Photo Focus Tasks. Unanimously the students identified the visual processes of the research methodology as efficacious to identifying, articulating and reflecting upon their perspectives in relation to the focus areas of the research. Specifically they highlighted most favourably the level of intellectual challenge involved in expressing their perspectives through photographs, and the challenge involved in explaining their views to the researcher. Many students commented that visual modes of expression provide a more direct means of communicating their thinking than writing – the entrenched mode of communication of learning at school.

Five aspects of the Extended Visual Dialogue methodology were identified by students as ways they preferred to learn and work and would like to experience more often in their classroom learning context:

1. Ongoing intellectual challenge that engaged their imagination;
2. High degree of autonomy in the sense of having the freedom to make their own decisions regarding the photographs they took, and the degree to which they participated in the research;
3. Opportunity for self-exploration via the focus of the research on their perceptions of themselves and their world;
4. Extended time to formulate their perspectives; and
5. Absence of judgment about the quality of their images and perspectives, and their contribution overall to the research.

The students noted that most often at school they are engaged in learning about other people and events in the world but the research gave them an opportunity to learn more about themselves and their world for the first time. Taken together the above elements provide middle level teachers key ingredients to incorporate when designing curricula and selecting pedagogical strategies to engage early adolescent students in the learning process.

The students assigned central importance to the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers to support and enhance their own and others learning. Working collaboratively provides students access to the diverse viewpoints of their peers, highlights trends in thinking within the group, provides them with mistakes to learn from and reinforces feelings of camaraderie in the learning process. Teachers are preferred who actively promote collaboration through the technology they employ i.e. smartboards and the teaching strategies they select. The students articulated a sound understanding of how they learn best, aspects of school that impede their learning, attributes of teachers that best support their learning, their personal goals for learning and how school fits with their personal aspirations. .

The importance of teachers as a key learning support was emphasised by the students. Teachers are preferred who act predictably and respectfully towards students within the classroom, have sound curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, teach the full range of subjects in a balanced way (include lots of physical education!), and who demonstrate a lively personality and enthusiasm for learning. A sound knowledge of students personally and an ability to incorporate this knowledge into the teaching and learning process was identified by students as the most important quality of an effective teacher. In contrast teachers who respond unpredictably to students' requests for assistance by yelling and public humiliation cause students a great deal of anxiety and represent a key impediment to student learning. The students noted that they would rather consult other students or avoid asking teachers for help altogether than risk unreasonable censure.

Students demonstrated a high degree of consensus regarding the personal and more global concerns central to their lives. Worry about the health and wellbeing of family and extended family members was most prevalent with students expressing frustration at not being able to influence significantly the habits and behaviour of their parents. Most common concerns included recent health scares related to smoking, alcohol use and illness. Surprisingly many students highlighted their responsibility for pets as an important personal concern. For many students looking after a pet is the only occasion in their lives where they have ultimate responsibility for another living being. Descriptions of their relationships with their pets emphasised the opportunity to talk openly to and share affection with animals in a way not available often with other human beings. Pets are perceived as non-judgmental and accepting of their owners. The importance the students assign to caring for a pet suggest opportunities for service learning involving such as volunteering at animal centres where students can take responsibility for the wellbeing of animals as well as make a meaningful contribution to their wider community (Stewart and Nolan, 1992). Exploring how reciprocal trust and affection can be developed in personal relationships with others could form the focus of curriculum inquiry that addresses issues relevant to the students' lives.

Students' concerns about the world in which they live indicate a deep-seated belief prevalent among the group that as individuals they have very little influence in the world and are at the mercy of the actions and behaviour of others. Contexts used to exemplify these beliefs included pollution in the local and global environment, war and global conflict and racism. However the students acknowledged that solutions to these global issues lie with individuals and the power of the collective will. The students' perspectives suggest an opportunity for the development of curriculum inquiry units that involve students in social action making a real difference first in the issues facing their local community and extending into the global community, affording students real experience of their personal agency and influence in the world.

The depth of knowledge students hold about themselves and their learning preferences as well as the real issues they are willing to share that concern them in their lives reinforces the potential for and desirability of including the students and their views as a starting point for co-constructing learning programmes and experiences. The participating students (and their teachers) saw the potential of the Extended Visual Dialogue research methodology, specifically the image-based research methods for their work in the classroom. Follow-on projects in the participating schools continue to explore the transfer of the research methodology into the teaching and learning process as a pedagogical approach appropriate specifically for the early adolescent age group. It is the conclusion of the research however that more important than the efficacy of the image-based methods to elicit authentically the voice of students, is the applicability of the research relationship developed between the researcher and the student co-researchers. The relationship based on parity of esteem, partnership and an acknowledgment of students as experts on their own experience and preferences could be enacted between students and teachers in classrooms as the core aspect of a middle schooling approach.

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