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Taking Note: Engaging Students as Co-Researchers¹

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Abstract

Research in schools, conducted with students as participants, often attempts to understand the student experience. Yet, by crafting the study through adult eyes, researchers run the risk of limiting and influencing what students tell us (Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). This article explores what happens when university researchers intentionally engage with students as co-researchers, an engagement that affects both the product and the process of research. As product, the research community gains a crucial layer of perspective in understanding the complexities of school; as process, the research becomes an important pedagogical tool for students, validating their roles as researchers of their own realities.

Keywords: collaborative inquiry, pedagogy, qualitative research, education, co-researchers, restorative approaches, Scotland, Canada

When we conduct educational research, students are, to varying degrees, implicitly engaged as co-researchers. As co-researchers, students observe, ask questions, describe situations, and analyze concepts. Through questionnaires, interviews, observations or other means they offer their expertise to us, the official university based researchers. Most researchers rarely think of students beyond their role as participants, albeit critical ones, in research. This article explores what happens for students and researchers when university researchers intentionally identify and engage with students as co-researchers.

Research in schools often attempts to understand the student experience. To gain that understanding, adult researchers frequently choose to ask students questions about their experience through interviews, focus groups or questionnaires. Although listening to students plays an important role in educational research, providing a foundation from which researchers and educational leaders can develop informed opinions, listening alone is insufficient. Interview questions and other research tools are crafted through adult eyes, limiting and influencing what students talk about (Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). Instead, researchers need to find ways to engage students as “concerned partners, coherent contributors, and equal agents of change in schools” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 13).

Engaging with students as co-researchers affects both the product and the process of research. The product or data that researchers collect, when produced by student co-researchers, has the potential to more accurately reflect the students’ own experience than methods based on traditional questionnaires and interviews. Accurate representations of the student experience are crucial as students reveal what is and what is not working in their classrooms (Wilson & Corbett, 2001). The process of how co-researchers engage in the study becomes an exercise in pedagogy, as students peer into their own environment and learn how to view and analyze that environment differently. According to Fletcher (2004), meaningful student involvement in research “seeks to raise students above their own narrow conceptions of self-interest for the benefit of the schools and communities they are members of” (p. 4).

The research on which this article is based was a multi-site case study of two schools set in different contexts – one in Scotland and one in Canada. The case study explored schools that adopted a restorative justice approach,

intended to empower the school community – school staff and students – collectively to create safe and just schools. Although data was also collected from teachers and principals to understand the broader context, the primary focus was on the student experience.

The idea of *taking note* will be explored on several levels in this paper. The term *taking note* is used, as opposed to *taking notes*, to connote the practice of observing with care or paying close attention. First, and most obvious, the students engaged as co-researchers *took note* of their classrooms and the school. We detail why this methodology was chosen, how it was enacted and some of the challenges that were encountered. Second, we *take note* of lessons learned from entering into this process with students. Finally, we conclude with a discussion about how educational researchers can *take note* intentionally to incorporate student voice in their research.

Our study was guided by the following research questions: 1) How does working with students as co-researchers help university researchers understand the student experience of restorative approaches (RA)? 2) How does collaborative learning or inquiry facilitate student understanding and the expression of their experiences? 3) How do these pedagogical practices inform our understanding of qualitative methods?

Conceptual and Methodological Framework: Students Take Note

Defining Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) is a diverse, multi-layered concept that does not easily lend itself to a universal definition (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Woolford, 2009). Broadly, RJ views harm not primarily as a violation of rules or laws, but as a violation of people and relationships (Zehr, 2002). The centrality of relationships makes RJ relevant not only to the justice system, but to most social units, organizations or institutions – from neighborhoods and families to places of worship and to schools.

There is nothing radically new about RJ. Elliot (2011) lists among its many roots: alternative dispute resolution, Aboriginal teachings and circle processes, faith-based approaches, victimology, therapeutic discourses, peacemaking criminology, and penal abolitionism. While its exact origins may be disputed (Daly, 2002), and the term has only been articulated in

Western society since the early 1970s, there is no doubt that RJ's inherent values resonate with many traditions and communities (Sawatsky, 2001). People intimately understand that harm is a violation of people and relationships, not only laws.

The Western practice of RJ emerged from discontent with the perceived inflexibility and impersonal nature of the retributive model of state justice. Zehr (1990) depicts the modern retributive justice system as one where the state is viewed as the victim and actual victims are denied any participatory role. Former police chief and Canadian senator, Vernon White, concurred with Zehr, characterizing justice in Canada as a "system that is increasingly institutionalized, bureaucratized and less personal than it was previously." (White, 1998, p. 4). In contrast, Morrison (2007a) writes that the essence of RJ is "creating safe spaces for dialogue through building communities of care, where storytelling and listening are valued and emotional understanding is developed, so individuals are enriched with the capacity, and given the opportunity, to take responsibility for harm done, and to repair it" (p. 6).

Defining Restorative Approaches in Schools

While RJ has been used broadly within and as an alternative to the criminal justice system, its popularity and practice in education is relatively recent (Drewery, 2004). Nevertheless, it appears to be rising in popularity in schools in North America and around the world (Lewis, 2009; McCluskey et al., 2008b; Morrison, 2007b; Solinas, 2007; Wachtel, 2009; Wearmouth, McKinney & Glynn, 2007). This wide interest has a number of motives: a desire to lower suspension and expulsion rates (Vaandering, 2009); a realization that punitive discipline is ineffective for long-term positive change (Morrison, 2007a; Stinchomb, Bazemore & Riestenberg, 2006); and a call to find substantive solutions for student disengagement, indiscipline, bullying, conflict and violence (Bargen, 2010; McCluskey et al., 2008b; Morrison, 2007a; Smith, 2006).

Although built upon the same principles and practices as in the criminal justice setting, RJ in schools is sometimes renamed *restorative approaches* (RA) to distance it from its criminal justice connotations (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Morrison, 2007b). RA diverges from traditional discipline in which punishment is meted out by an authority above. Instead, RA seeks to empower the school community to collectively create safe and

just schools. RA draws upon the strength of a number of similar movements such as conflict resolution education, character education, moral education and emotional literacy (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Morrison, 2007b; Schweigert, 1999). It marries the skills of conflict resolution education with the relational focus of the other movements. Amstutz & Mullet (2005) write, “The first focuses on finding a solution that is fair and acceptable to all parties; restorative discipline adds the additional layer of working on the relationship that was harmed or deterred” (p. 20).

Hendry (2009) agrees, stating that RA in schools is a philosophical approach that is fundamentally about building, maintaining and repairing relationships. This approach plays out in a continuum of practices, ranging from classroom meetings to peer mediation to multi-party restorative conferences. While descriptions of such a continuum vary, most agree that the practices range from proactive measures on one side to dealing with serious incidents of harm on the other (Morrison, 2007b). However, the varied understandings of the philosophy and practices result in approaches that look and feel quite different from one school to another.

McCluskey et al. (2008a) discuss instances of how RA can be used either to transform a school’s ethos or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, as another tool to emphasize compliance and punishment. The way people understand the goals of RA has profound effects on whether the approach is used to affirm or transform institutions, the people in them, and societies. Woolford (2009) refers to these understandings, goals and the context in which they operate, as the *politics* of restorative justice. It was through engaging students as co-researchers that we hoped to understand how RA was being used and experienced in the particular schools that we studied.

In thinking through how to approach our study, a precedent had been set by other restorative researchers (Umbreit & Armour, 2010; Vaandering, 2009; Zehr, 2005) to align methodology with the values and principles of restorative justice. Although these can be stated in a variety of ways, commonalities abound. In a 2006 conference presentation, Howard Zehr, often referred to as the grandfather of restorative justice, identified what he believes are the three most important values upon which to ground all restorative work: respect, humility and awe. Elaborating, he wrote that we need to *respect* the perspectives, needs and worth of all involved; embrace a *humility* that recognizes the limitations of what we know, reveals how our biographies shape our knowledge and biases, and calls us to a deep

appreciation for and openness to others' realities; and, to approach the world with *awe*, appreciating the beauty of mystery, ambiguity, paradox and contradictions within the lives of those we meet (Zehr, 2006, pp. 12-13).

Since the focus of this research was on the perspectives of students, those most affected by the use of restorative approaches in schools, the methodology needed to be shaped to respect the perspective of students, recognize the researcher's limitations in understanding their realities and appreciate the ambiguities and paradoxes that exist in their lives. Drawing on the insights of the research on "student voice," our methodological approach was premised on the following convictions articulated by Cook-Sather: "that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and, that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education" (2006, p. 359; Fielding, 2004). In short, we wanted to engage with students in such a way that they taught us about their experiences with RA while at the same time allowing them to enter into their own inquiry into familiar school experiences. The benefits of collaborative inquiry for individual learning, as Sampson and Clark assert, "do not simply arise from asking individuals to work in groups, but are rather the result of individuals engaging in certain types of learning processes during the types of activities" (2008, p. 455).

The concept of co-researchers highlights two specific values often associated with RA: the need to involve and give voice to those most affected; and, the acknowledgement that process is as important – and sometimes more important – than end product (Cronin-Lampe & Cronin-Lampe, 2010; Hendry, 2009; Umbreit & Armour, 2011; Woolford, 2009). Engaging students as co-researchers embodied the first value as the student experience was prioritized; students were given voice in learning circles and asked to offer their expertise as they observed and analyzed their schools. Secondly, the focus shifted to the process, rather than product. Although the results of the students' inquiries were one significant part of the study, results were intertwined with the process in which they were achieved. Many lessons – for all involved, including the co-researchers – happened in the doing, not in the result, as will be discussed below.

The concept of co-researchers builds on Grant's (1993) idea of shadowing, in which teachers were asked to follow a student in his/her own school for a whole day to gain an understanding of the student experience.

By engaging students to be co-researchers, the students were *shadowed* by the university researchers from afar, as the students recorded their experiences from their own perspective. The concept also builds on the practice of using diaries in social research to capture little experiences of everyday life (Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli, 2003; Creswell, 2007). The following section will explain the practicalities of how students were recruited, how they related their experiences and how they engaged in their own inquiry.

Methodological Framework

Participants

Scotland and Canada were chosen due to their different experiences with RA. In Canada, RA has been applied in schools for 20 years (Drewery & Winslade, 2003; Morrison, 2007b). The first site of victim-offender facilitation is considered to be in Elmira, Ontario in 1974. Many RA practices and approaches in Canada are also strongly tied to its Indigenous people (Eagle, 2011; Elliot, 2011; Vaandering, 2009). Although some argue that this Indigenous connection is either dismissed without due respect (Eagle as cited in Enns & Myers, 2009; Vaandering, 2009) or artificially enhanced to lend credibility to restorative justice (Daly, 2002; Woolford, 2009), there is wide recognition that RA in Canada has deep roots.

In contrast to its history in Canada, Scotland introduced its first school based RA pilot project in 2004 (Hendry, 2009; McCluskey et al., 2008b). Scottish practitioners drew on the experience of other countries to glean information, apply previously developed ideas and build their own model specific to Scotland (Hendry, 2009). A tradition of involving students and families in decision-making and inter-professional meetings to deal with serious difficulties provided a context where the principles were already in place to embrace RA (McCluskey et al., 2008b).

The study focused on one school in Scotland and one in Canada. The schools were selected for similarities in age of students and the length of time the schools had been involved with RA.

Scotland

The chosen school served slightly fewer than 600 students, ranging in age from 11 to 18, and employed approximately 60 full-time teachers. It is located in an economically-depressed area of Eastern Scotland: the number of students eligible for free school meals due to low income was more than double that of the national Scottish average of 15.4 per cent; in 2010/2011, 14 per cent of graduates from this school were going on to higher education, compared with the national average of 36 per cent (Education Scotland, 2011). The school was seen as a leader in helping students with additional support needs and, as such, attracted students with a wide range of accommodations. Additional support needs were described as falling into four overlapping themes: learning environment, family circumstances, disability or health need, and social and emotional factors (Education Scotland, n.d.). It was within this context, five years previous, that RA was formally brought into the school. This study was conducted over three and a half consecutive weeks spent in the school in February and March 2013 and was designed to concentrate on one grade level, so as to deepen understanding of one group of students. Since many of the older grades were engaged in national preliminary examinations, the school recommended working with the first year students, most of whom were 12 years old.

Alberta

The chosen school had just under 350 students, between the ages of 3 and 12. Located in an area of town where many new Canadians first arrive, the school was exceptionally multicultural: by one estimate, on the School Board website, students were identified as having almost 40 different home countries, with the predominant ethnic groups being Arabic, Somali and Aboriginal. One third of students were new Canadians, many attending school for the first time. The School Board estimated that English was a second language for approximately 80 per cent of the families. The neighborhood surrounding the school is multicultural, low-income and transient. According to neighborhood indicators published by the city in 2010, this neighborhood had three and a half times as many low-income households as the city average and three times as many food hamper users. Similar to the Scottish school, this school was also seen as a leader in working with children with high needs. Out of the 350 students, approximately 60 of them were in the early education program which served students from outside the neighborhood with special educational needs and

25 of the students in grades one through six, also not necessarily drawn from the community, were in separate classes for children with “severe, chronic, extreme and pervasive behaviours” (Alberta School Board, n.d.). Within this context the school implemented RA five years prior to the study. The researcher spent five consecutive weeks in this school in April and May 2013.

The focus here was on the grade 5 and 6 students, ranging between 10 and 12 years old. The school recommended these grades since their age made them more appropriate for the co-researcher activities and many of them would be familiar with RA, having been exposed to it for the majority of their time at the school. The age of the students matched well with those in Scotland.

Data Collection

As it is difficult to fully separate data collection from data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2007), it is important to state that both data collection and analysis were conducted through a social constructionist lens. This lens recognizes the “radical interdependence” between ourselves and the world in which we do not create meaning out of nothing, but construct it within relationships (Crotty, 1998, p. 45). Consistent with this, all research activities were undertaken to see how understandings and experiences of RA were constructed, interpreted and made meaningful. Below, we explain in more detail the two main forms of data collection.

Learning Circles

Learning circles are focus groups conducted like restorative classroom circles, using similar guidelines. As with focus groups, learning circles elicit stories and in-depth explanations of people’s thoughts and experiences (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 1998). Learning circles, however, are meant to achieve more than providing the researcher with desired data. Learning circles take the lead from Freire’s cultural circles, in which participants are moved from objects to subjects in their learning. Subjects, according to Freire (2002), have “the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and transform [their] reality” (p. 4). Learning circles emphasize that participants are the ones with the knowledge and expertise and they are teaching each other and the researcher about their own reality. Viewing participants as subjects opens up the possibility that

learning circles could be a stepping-stone beyond discussion into transformed choices and actions on the topics being discussed.

Learning circles mirror the relational process inherent in restorative approaches and often have a ritualistic aspect to them. Each round was begun with a question or topic presented by the adult researcher. One student would offer to answer first and then everyone around the circle would have a chance to answer. Following each initial round, the discussion on that particular question was opened up to flow more naturally. The facilitated rounds were done, in keeping with restorative values, to ensure that everyone's voice was valued and heard equally. A talking piece was used to focus the conversation and ensure that one person spoke at a time. The students created pseudonyms for themselves and referred to each other by that name.

The three student learning circle protocols had three separate foci: communication, rules and community. These themes were selected from the literature to represent a range of aspects connected to RA in schools. Communication is essential for building, maintaining and repairing relationships (Hendry, 2009; Hopkins, 2011); the importance of rules and how rule breaking is handled suggest where schools fall on a punitive to restorative continuum (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Hendry, 2009); and community represents an alternative way to view the classroom and an understanding of RA's connection to broader society (Elliot, 2011; Morrison, 2007a).

The initial questions of each circle focused on the school in general. Students were asked three preliminary questions: 1) What do you like about your school? 2) What would you change about your school? 3) Tell me how people get along in your school. Then, depending on the circle theme (rules, communication or community), the questions differed. As an example, the following questions were posed in the three respective circles – rules, communication and community: How is the breaking of rules handled here?; How do you talk about things that are difficult?; and, What do you think it means to be a good community member?

The learning circles provided an opportunity for students to talk together about their experiences at school. Learning circles acknowledge that the work of the circle is unique to its place and time, the people who are present, the dynamics between them, and how they contribute through their

words and silences. Pedagogically, learning circles that are structured around small groups for students to engage in common tasks and to learn by means of mutual interaction are common place in some teaching environments such as science (Rozenszayn & Ben-Zvi Assaraf, 2011). Studies that have investigated the characteristics of small group collaborative learning in classrooms have identified five major components as essential to a positive learning environment: interdependence; collective responsibility; reciprocity; social cooperation skills; and, social processes (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Rennie et al. 2003; Shachar & Sharan, 1994; Slavin, 1996).

For our purposes, collaborative learning through learning circles was achieved in the following ways. Learning circles were introduced as opportunities not only for the university researchers to learn from the students, but also for students to learn from each other (interdependence). Throughout the process, the conversations sometimes affirmed ideas that individuals put forward, and sometimes offered conflicting opinions; each statement reinforced how complex and layered schooling can be (collective responsibility). For example, the students in the Community Learning Circles were asked what it meant to be a good friend. In a Scottish student circle, Georgia began the conversation by stating that a good friend is “somebody that’s nice to you. Doesnae pick on you, shares stuff with you.” Awesome McAwesome countered that idea: “I don’t think you have to be nice to them. ‘Cause... (*laughter*) You don’t, to be friends! ‘Cause me and my pal, let’s call him Daniel McAwesome, we play, like, we make fun of each other all the time. But we can know it’s a joke ‘cause we’re that good friends. But, the thing is, if someone tried to start a fight with him, if they even touched him, I’d punch them.” The conversation highlighted various ideas of friendship, for example, what being *nice* might mean, and it opened up a discussion about how students demonstrated friendship to one another. One student alone could not have provided this layered understanding of school-based friendship; their collective knowledge was brought forth through dialogue.

For collaborative learning, both the process of the circle conversations and the content of those conversations were crucial (reciprocity). The students were given the floor as the experts, teaching adults and their peers and, perhaps, themselves about their school experience (social processes and cooperative skills). They were engaged in what Freire (2002) described as one of the first steps from object to subject in their learning.

Co-researchers

Learning circles, however, were only one way to learn from students and engage with them as subjects in their learning. Given that social contexts and group dynamics affect data generated from such processes as focus groups and learning circles (Hollander, 2004; Kitzinger, 1994), we wanted to triangulate what we were learning in the circles with other research activities. We also wanted to provide students with an opportunity to be subjects of their learning.

Thus, at the end of the learning circles, students were given the choice to become *co-researchers*. Rather than use the more vague term *co-researcher*, we talked about them as *detectives* or *reporters*. Students were asked to pay attention for three days to whatever theme (communication, rules, or community) that was discussed in the circle. In Scotland, out of the 18 learning circle participants, 11 students acted as co-researchers. In Alberta, of the 20 learning circle participants, 19 expressed an interest and were given parental permission to act as co-researchers. Each participating student was given a notebook in which they wrote their pseudonym. Without using names or identifying factors, they took note of everything they saw or heard that had to do with the previously discussed theme. *Taking note* entailed drawing pictures, writing words, writing quotations, whatever they were most comfortable with and recording what they felt was significant; we wanted to know what they personally thought. We also discussed how to keep the notebooks safe – treating them as personal diaries that would not be shared with others – and how to record observations so as to not disrupt the class or their own learning – using breaks and time between classes to jot down ideas. At the end of each of the three days, they returned the notebooks to the university researcher so that they would not be lost and then the students picked them up in the morning before school began. This routine also allowed the opportunity to see how the notebooks were progressing. After the three-day observation period was over, the university researcher met with each student individually. During those meetings, the students explained what they had taken note of, what they thought it meant in terms of the culture in their school in general, and they talked about the experience of taking note.

Discussion: The University Researchers Take Note

The process of engaging with students as co-researchers has informed our research framework, raised questions about how to alter this approach in the future and reinforced the importance of giving voice to student perspectives. We return here to the initial questions guiding our research: 1) How does working with students as co-researchers help university researchers understand the student experience of RA? 2) How does collaborative learning or inquiry facilitate student understanding and the expression of their experiences? 3) How do these pedagogical practices inform our understanding of qualitative methods? What follows are three themes that emerged: blank notebooks and full minds; freedom versus guidance; and making the abstract real.

Blank Notebooks and Full Minds

This first theme focuses on the experience in Scotland, the initial experience of engaging co-researchers. The first day when the notebooks were returned, there was an impressive variety of ways in which the students had approached their task: some had written pages of detailed notes; others had pictures and captions (E.g., stick figure of teacher ignoring student with his/her hand up); some had a few point-form phrases (E.g.: - Some boys disruptive but teacher wasn't in bad mood like she usually is; - Some teachers shout at you for no reason); one had quotations from fellow students (E.g., "Some people are very annoying"); and a few were blank. The second day, only a few of the students added anything to their initial notes. The third day, only one wrote additional observations. There was one notebook that stayed blank throughout the whole process.

This outcome was disappointing to the university researchers, causing them to reflect on whether the task had been too onerous or too abstract, whether the students had simply gotten bored, or whether there had been anything of note for them to observe. It seemed that this part of the research had failed, at least on two accounts – failed to provide the university researchers with insight into the student experience and failed to give the students the experience of inquiring into their own realities.

It was not until a university researcher met with each student individually, as they explained their notebooks, that the meaning of the notebooks became evident. As there were 11 different personalities taking

note, there were 11 different explanations and experiences. Common to all, however, was the idea that taking note was not confined to their notebooks. Some of the students with the least amount written down had the most to tell about what they had seen, heard, observed and thought. One of the boys, for example, John, had recorded only one item in his notebook: a drawing of a teacher shouting. In the one-on-one interview, however, he spoke for almost ten minutes, sharing his thoughts on teacher attitudes, personal stories of being bullied and advice on how to best deal with misbehavior. For some students, it seemed that the act of intentionally asking them to take note increased their attention to classroom dynamics and interactions, regardless of whether the notebooks were used. Jeanne gave the example of an event she was unable to record in her notebook: “And then I was thinking what I could write when [the teacher] was sort of giving us a lecture, really. And [the teacher] just keeps saying the same words so I just, like, wondered what I’d say.” Most of the students began the one-on-one interviews by reading exactly what they had written or by describing the pictures they had drawn. Once they had relayed that aspect of their taking note, all elaborated on what they had seen: examples of behavior (“Somebody in first year stole my phone away from me and a teacher was talking to another teacher not that far away. And looked at them running away but, like, didn’t really do anything about it” – Jemima); generalizations about their classroom (“The teacher gets angry at the whole class and we end up in trouble for doing nothing” - Daisy); and thoughts about why things are the way they are (“Cause if you’re self-conscious then you’re going to let yourself in easily if someone makes one wrong remark about you. It’ll just ruin your whole entire life” – Georgia). It was encouraging to note how much more they had to report than what was actually recorded.

Meaning, for both students and the university researcher was created in two ways: first, through the student explaining the notebook. The notebooks on their own would have meant very little to an outsider; each one needed to be given life through the voice of the student who had created it. The student explanations of the content of the notebooks created concrete meaning for the university researcher. The notebooks were used as a stepping-stone from which the student could discuss his or her actual observations and what he or she felt that they meant. Springer Spaniel, for instance, had recorded several different examples of negative teacher-student interactions. In the interview, he tried to explain why some interactions escalated quickly and others were neutralized: “Teachers, they have different tempers and they think different. Some teachers’ tempers are better than

others” (3). During this stage, students moved beyond simple observations and created meaning for themselves as they connected what they observed with a deeper analysis.

Second, meaning was created through the very process of observing. Most of the students took the request that they take note of their school very seriously. Even though some of them felt uncomfortable or unable to write down their observations, they all had ideas and thoughts that they wanted to share verbally in the individual interviews. Georgia, for example, although not having written much in her notebook, focused her interview on the presence of cliques in the school: “Cause there’s definitely, like, crowds in this school. There’s, like, good people, popular people, mean people, bullies, smart people, dumb people, fit people, unfit people, healthy people, just like chubby-ish people” (8). She explained which groups she was part of and why, provided advice for a new student navigating the cliques and lamented the difficulty of switching groups once you were labeled as part of one.

Thus, the student process of observing created meaning for the university researcher, providing insight into what students discerned as important to include in the notebooks and verbal explanations. The social process also created meaning for the students. The act of asking students to take note of their school heightened their awareness of everyday encounters and encouraged them to see themselves as experts in interpreting school experiences. In writing about implementing effective relational pedagogy for Maori students, Bishop et al. (2014) recommend a classroom where power is shared and teachers relate to and interact with students so that new knowledge is co-created. In this study, new knowledge was co-created by the university researchers and the students.

Freedom Versus Guidance

The initial sense that the notebooks had failed raised questions as to how to approach the idea of taking note in a different way in Alberta. Given that both the process of taking note and the process of explaining the notebooks elicited and validated the student perspective, it did not seem advisable to abandon the notebooks. It was crucial, however, to make the experience more accessible to and satisfying for the student co-researchers.

By including the drawing of pictures under the rubric of note taking, the university researchers hoped that the activity would be inclusive of those

students who, for whatever reason, did not have advanced writing skills. Indeed, one Scottish student who identified as having dyslexia chose to draw only pictures in his notebook. Yet, there were several individuals, regardless of writing ability, who found it difficult to take notes on what they were observing. One girl in the Scottish study, Jemima, expressed a common sentiment: “I couldn’t put some stuff into words.” On the other hand, other students thrived during the activity of taking notes and observing their classes; Daisy, for instance, mentioned that she “found it quite fun” (Scotland).

Working with students as co-researchers was meant to be an activity that was open to student interpretation. Warren (2000), in an article on working with the students in his class as researchers, concluded that his students’ experience would have benefited from a more open process where students decided what was important to include in their research activity. Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay (2000) concurred, reminding us to use open-ended questions when interviewing students since questions that may seem neutral to adults can be interpreted as leading by children. Therefore, as much as possible, the activity needed to be designed for the students to decide what was important to include in their notebooks without adult leading or intervention.

The fact that several students seemed unsure about what to include, however, suggested that the task might have been too abstract for some. As Sheldon stated, “It was quite hard to see, like, what type of stuff I was trying to write down. How to put it into words” (Scotland). Thus, in the second part of the study, in Alberta, the activity changed slightly. In keeping with the idea of the student as expert, the students were brought together at the beginning of each observation day for a few minutes so that they could share different ideas for how to take note. Students were asked to talk about how the previous day’s observations had gone and were invited to discuss any problems they had translating what they saw into their notebooks. Again, there was value in this strategy both as a product and a process. As product, the assumption was that students would be better equipped to record more of what they observed. As a reciprocal process, the students were validated as having the answers within themselves. This practice also aligned with RA, looking to collective problem solving as a way to build individual and collective skills and a sense of community.

Additionally, the directions were altered regarding the activity. In Scotland, students were asked to pay attention for three days to whatever theme was discussed in their learning circle – communication, rules or community. Therefore, the learning circle discussions presumably shaped what students thought of as appropriate for their notebooks. The learning circle discussions, while student focused, still centred on questions that the adult researcher asked. In Alberta, in an effort to lessen the effect that this line of questioning might have had on the students' observations, as well as attempting to give the activity more focus for the students, all co-researchers, regardless of the learning circle in which they participated, were asked to take note of all three themes: communication one day, rules the next, and community on the final day. This layering of collective responsibility for each task was presented as their *mission of the day* during the short group morning meeting. Although this initiative cannot be directly attributed to these changes, the majority of the notebooks in Alberta contained significantly more observations for all three days than in Scotland.

Making the Abstract Real

Even with the attempt to lessen the influence of the learning circles on student observation, students often used the learning circle discussion as a springboard for the way in which they took note of their school. In Liby's learning circle, there was a discussion about how students dealt with their own problems. When sharing her observations in the individual interviews, she connected the learning circle discussion to this story: "We're going swimming and [the teacher] said that if we fight, we don't get to go. So the boys wanted to go badly. So they got in a fight and they thought the girls saw but they didn't. So they went around and they asked everybody not to tell 'cause they would solve it" (Alberta). For many, their observations built on what had been discussed in the learning circles and they highlighted examples that they had seen that either proved or disproved what they or someone else had suggested in the circle.

What emerged from among the students, in both Alberta and Scotland, was a dialogue between the abstract and the concrete. Student co-researchers engaged in a three-stage dialogic in which student insights were formed and then informed by the thoughts of others and their own observations. This dialogical process or interdependence facilitated both student learning and the expression of the student experience. The process began in the learning

circle, moved to the observations and continued with the student analysis of their experience.

The first stage occurred in the learning circles where, although concrete examples were given, the discussions often revolved around generalizations. Here are two examples: “People get along pretty good when they’re not fighting. It’s really peaceful and you just see friends being friends, and like, being funny. And you don’t really see much big fights and people beating each other up here” (Alberta Community Group 2); The school is a community because “you’ve got a load of people that you ken [know] and even if you’re not pals with them, they’re still there for you when you need them” (Scottish Community Group 1). Through these generalizations about the student experience and life at school, students put forward an initial analysis, one that had not yet been tested by observation and further thought.

In the second stage, the co-researcher observations and interviews took those generalizations and gave them texture by offering specific examples that either strengthened or dismissed the initial generalized analysis. For example, detailed illustrations were provided of how students treated one another: “Somebody asked for a pencil, right, and she went, ‘Nwa! You seen yourself, you’re not gettin’ my one!’ And then she just starts being mean and cheeky and it’s annoying...” (Georgia, Scotland). Other examples were given for how students worked to solve interpersonal issues: “The other boy that was, like, yelling at her and stuff started swearing at her, making fun of her parents, making fun of her. But then we helped her with the problem. We walked her away, we calmed her down, we made her laugh, we played with her, we gave her cookies, and some of us gave her gum. We talked to her and we talked to the boy, too” (Kitty Pie, Alberta).

The dialogic continued into the third stage as those concrete examples were then folded back into abstract generalizations and analysis during the final interview. The university researcher asked three questions at the end of each individual co-researcher interview: 1. From what you observed, what would you like to see more of in your school? 2. From what you observed, what would you like to see less of in your school? 3. If there were a new student arriving tomorrow, what would you tell him or her about your school? In answering these questions, students offered an analysis of what they had been observing over the three specific days combined with their general student experience in the school. Despite their observations

containing many negative examples of student-student and student-teacher interactions, their final analysis was decidedly more balanced: “I’d say it’s actually a pretty nice school. People actually get along sometimes. And if anyone fights they would actually be solving it. So you wouldn’t have to worry about after school, what would happen to you if you got in a fight. And we eat lots of good stuff” (Code007, Alberta); “It gives you a lot of great opportunities to do stuff in life, they do lots of good shows and people are very talented. But I would say watch out for the bullies and people who are just annoying because they’ll let you down” (Nathalia, Scotland); “I suppose if it were a perfect school, I’m pretty sure it’d be quite boring” (Jeanne, Scotland).

By engaging their own collaborative learning or inquiry based skills to explore their familiar school experiences, these co-researchers brought together peer discussions, individual observations and their own analysis to present layer upon layer of the complexities of schooling. The sense that students were not only, in Freire’s terms, objects but also subjects of this learning, however, reflects an adult analysis of how students benefited from their experience of participating in the study. Anecdotally, students referred to the learning circle and co-researcher activities as “fun” and “interesting” and one student in Alberta, Justice, vowed to continue taking note of her classroom for the remainder of the year. Although the university researchers shared reports with the students and requested feedback, being off site prevented any further opportunity to hear from students, themselves, about how the research activities produced long term benefits.

Conclusion: Educational Researchers Take Note

For this study, intentional engagement with students as co-researchers was critical both in terms of the contributions students made to research and as a pedagogical approach to qualitative research. Viewing students as experts of their own realities and providing opportunities for them not only to share that expertise but also to engage in an inquiry into it, enriches both our body of knowledge as researchers and, potentially, the knowledge gained by those individuals who participated in the study. As a product, the research community gains a crucial layer of perspective in understanding the complexities of school; as a process, the students involved have their voices validated and the activity becomes an important learning tool for what it means to be both expert and researcher of their own realities. This engagement of students as co-researchers has the potential to challenge both

adults and students to, in the words of Fletcher (2004), “re-examine the long-held view that students should be passive recipients of teaching” (13).

Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000), in an examination of the social construction of childhood and the implications for researching children’s perspectives, declared, “The reality experienced by children and young people in educational settings cannot be fully comprehended by inference and assumption” (61). If we accept this observation to be true, it follows that we find substantive ways to bring the student perspective to the forefront of research, as unmediated by our own perspective as is possible.

In this project, student co-researchers were invaluable to the study of student experience of RA. Understanding the actual impact of RA on students -- rather than the one intended by adults -- assists educators in considering more deliberately how to translate their intended message into student experience. Yet, even in the research described in this paper, the adult voice appeared dominant, both in the study’s design and in its implementation. To better understand the student experience of RA, and to better engage students pedagogically, student perspectives should be included in the design of such a study, not only the implementation. This project valued students as active partners and co-creators of knowledge; yet more could be done to ensure that they were “equal agents of change” in the study (Fletcher, 2004).

Radical pedagogy combines cutting-edge educational developments with an orientation toward social change (McGettigan, 1999). Engaging students as co-researchers serves both these intertwined purposes. Viewing students as co-researchers explicitly addresses childhood as a social construction; rather than perpetuate the conventional way of viewing children – as possessions or objects – student co-researchers are affirmed as participants, citizens and subjects (Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; Freire, 2002). Moreover, as a cutting-edge practice, student co-researchers have a voice that offers unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling as they inquire into their everyday situations and provide insights as current – not only future – researchers. As a method orientated toward social change, the insights of student co-researchers warrant the attention and the responses of those in decision-making positions to comprehend fully student reality and, ideally, to make choices that provide opportunities to actively shape education for the good of all. Engaging student co-researchers, as radical pedagogy, serves both current educational purposes – to improve current

practice – and future ones – to empower students as subjects of their learning.

Endnotes

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