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Connecting Rights and Reality in Educational Research with Children and Young People: Democratising Research Ethics Processes

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Context

▶ EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee (EU Commission 1 and 2)

▶ Participation in political and democratic life is the first thematic area of the Strategy

In 2022, the European Year of Youth, and in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to reconsider the processes that we, in the field of educational research with children and young people, adopt in our research. The new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021 a and b) are key European Commission policies aimed to "better protect all children, to help them fulfil their rights and to place them right at the centre of EU policy making". Participation in political and democratic life is the first thematic area of the Strategy, emphasising the need for Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) to be taken seriously.

Children and young people (CYP) must be able to act as agents of change in policy making and legislative decision-making processes that affect them. It is the ability of children and young people to act as agents of change within research that we are particularly addressing in this paper.

We welcome this direction as researchers who not only embrace participatory approaches to research with Children and young people, but see research as a tool for democratic change. In the light of children and young people's involvement with Black Lives Matter, Climate Justice and Gender violence campaigns it is clear that children and young people have more than a voice, but also the capability of changing and shaping the world around them.

This paper suggests that, whilst our own research methodologies may set out to work more democratically with Children and young people as partners, co-researchers and co-authors, there are tensions between the rights we wish to support and the realities of navigating institutional processes.

Unresolved "wicked problem"

(Cuevas-Parras, 2020)

- Problematic power relationships
- Categorising people leads to inequalities
- Contradictory aims

"involvement implies *doing to*; in contrast, engagement implies *doing with*" (Felazzo, 2011).

Cuevas-Parras was arguing about how education can often defeat children's right to participation due to adults perpetuating problematic power dynamics and problematic categorising which impact inequality and participation. Furthermore the current role of education is often seen as instilling knowledge and academic achievement, rather than a more holistic endeavour including democracy. Such narrowness often impedes democratic engagement.

We argue that there is a similar wicked problem in research with children and young people.
There are specific gatekeepers to academic research – in this presentation we are considering institutional ethics committees. (Full disclosure I am deputy chair of our school ethics committee at York St John).

One might question who and how people get onto such committees and how they might understand working with children and young people – or indeed conceptualise children and young people.

Such gatekeepers categorise different participants. Children and young people (along with other groups of people such as those who are disabled) are often, considered as "vulnerable" and therefore unable to participate in some research, let alone coproduce and co-author.

There are contradictory aims in research. The neoliberalisation of universities also pushes an agenda of Research as a source of competitive income generation rather than fundamentally driving democratic change. There is also a drive towards governance (wilkins) and protecting the university against claims.

Such an approach can lead to involvement in research for children and young people being about "doing to" rather than engagement as "doing with"(Ferlazzo, 2011). Just as Ferlazzo envisages parent engagement to shape the school, not just be involved with bake sales, we envisage democratic research as engaging children and young people in research that leads to change, not just about ticking boxes. We see children and young people as co-producers, researchers and authors on matters of research that affect them.

Today:

▶ Examining two examples from our research and the ethical tensions that arose.

▶ Use relational (Holland et al, 1998) and democratic (Ranciere, 2010, 2014) theory to analyse these tensions

▶ Suggest ways forward that might disrupt institutional behaviour and power relationships.

Using examples from our research and practice, this paper uses relational (Holland et al, 1998) and democratic (Rancière, 2010, 2014) theories to highlight the need to connect rights and reality in educational research with CYP. We argue for the adoption of more democratic, inclusive and equitable ethics processes that can explicitly support CYP to recognise and exercise their fundamental right to participate in matters that affect them (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Educational research ethics processes should reflect CYP's position in this type of research as "front and centre as subjects of rights, subjects of learning, and competent social actors, able to shape their educational environments" (Cuevas-Parras, 2020). However, such an approach is disruptive to institutional behaviour and power relationships.

I will start by a quick introduction to the theory.

Relational theory:

Considers relational identities, power and positionality (Ralls,2016, 2017, 2019)

▶ Supports policies and structures promoting social justice and solidarity (Burkitt, 2016; Cordelli, 2015; Donati and Archer, 2015).

▶ Focuses on relationships generating 'relational goods?' (such as interpersonal trust, emotional support, care and social influence) (Cordelli, 2015; Mulgan, 2012)

Relational engagement (Warren et al, 2009)

▶ Bridges gaps in culture and power

▶ Builds relationship for collaborative decision making and leadership opportunities.

- Relational theory provides a helpful way of understanding the relational identities and associated notions of power and positionality that emerge in education contexts (Ralls, 2016, 2017, 2019).

- Research has found that theories of the relational are helpful in supporting the development of policies and institutional structures that promote social justice and solidarity (

- Relational theory focuses on how relationships can be constituted to generate the 'relational goods' (such as **interpersonal trust, emotional support, care and social influence**) (Cordelli, 2015) that are required if there is to be a fundamental shift to a more reciprocal relationship between the state, civil society and citizens (Mulgan, 2012).

Core aspects of relational engagement (Warren et al, 2009):

- Set out to bridge gaps in culture and power
- Build relationships for collaborative democratic decision making and leadership opportunities

Democratic theory - Rancière

▶ Public sphere in which common sense thrives

▶ Private sphere – loss of agency and voice

▶ Those who are not allowed to be heard are dismissed as "mere noise" (2010:139)

▶ To be human is to demand a voice and to be heard. This is essential for democracy.

▶ Democracy is fundamentally disruptive to the status quo.

Two case studies

Toilet Talk

▶ Small participatory project in an English school, exploring, challenging and changing toilet policy and practice.

Place Conscious Education

▶ International Comparative Study examining policy and practice in education that actively encourages children and young people's engagement with the locality.

Both work with children and young people as co-researchers, co-producers and co-authors.


We will analyse two case studies through the theoretical lenses of relational and democratic theory.

The first case study is a participatory research project working with pupils to explore, challenge and change toilet policy and practice in an English secondary school.

The second example is an international comparative study that explores place conscious education initiatives in Barcelona, Berlin, New York and Rio de Janeiro.

Toilet Talk: Working with young people to improve school toilet policy and practice.

▶Teach them research skills

▶Carry out a research project about toilets with their peers.

▶Use the data to help develop school policy.

▶Carried out over 6 month period
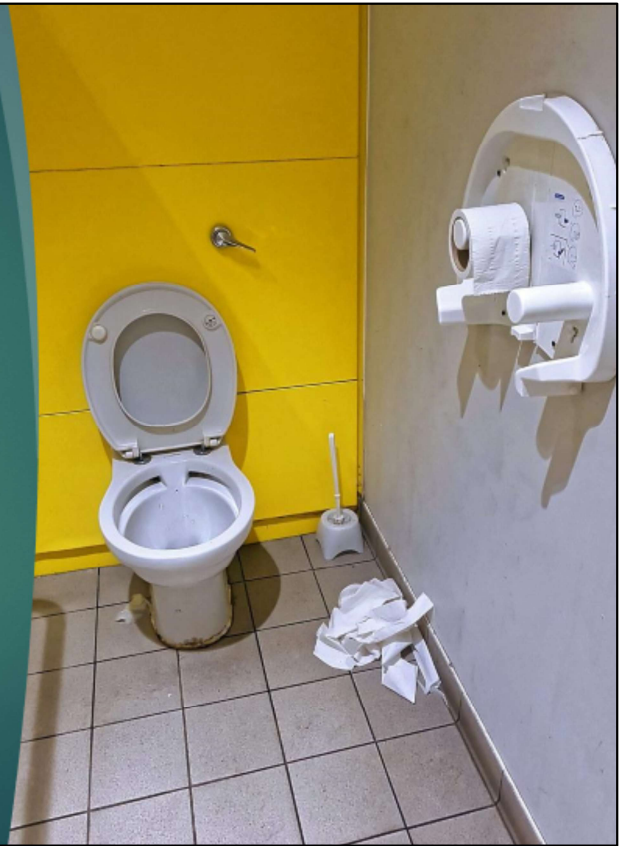
In England we have an increasingly authoritarian approach to schooling. Strict behaviour policies that included strict and limited toilet use. Moreover, toilets are a site of contestation generally with regard to safety, gender and disability.

Institutional tensions

▶ Couldn't trust year 10s to research and talk about toilets.

▶ Risked university reputation if it goes wrong.

▶ Could we separate the pupil as researchers and subject of Toilets?

Project
Year 12s
(16 and 17)

- ► Capable and thought through ethics very critically, making suggestions to the researcher.

- ► Defended anonymity despite pressure from teachers to divulge information.

- ► Identified flaws in school policy and now working with school to devise a new policy.

- ► Said that they felt listened to and heard for the first time.

- ► Wrote a blog post and are presenting at a research conference.

Redefining Education for an Inclusive Urban Economy: Becoming Relational

Debbie's research project is a larger study, examining policy and practice in education that actively encourages CYP's engagement with the locality. (Berlin, Barcelona, New York, and Rio de Janiero.

After focus groups, using a variety of approaches such as participatory mapping, in the latter stages of the project, CYP are supported to develop an exhibition or event where they give their own ideas and opinions on how education can help make their city a fairer place – and what they would like policymakers to do.

(An emergent area of interest is the growth in popularity of the social and solidarity urban economy (EESC, 2017; UNRISD, 2016; Vickers et al, 2017).

Rather than following individualistic, market driven approaches serving private concerns, a Social and Solidarity Urban Economic approach represents the belief that a change in relationships based on solidarity and co-operation is a fundamental component in developing sustainable and inclusive economic activities and policies in our cities.

So far, however, there has been little focus on how **education** theories, policies and practices could build stronger relationships with urban communities and help

to lay the foundations for more inclusive social solidarity economies. This project followed a comparative case study approach and included focus groups with children and young people that examined the lived realities within these cities. The culmination of each city's study was a public event such as a discussion or exhibition curated by the children.

▶A qualitative comparative case study approach.

▶•Year 1: Documentary and policy analysis: used to help identify appropriate urban case studies and to build professional relationships. Each city case study focuses on a different area of interest (governance, pedagogy, curriculum or policy).

▶•Years 1, 2 & 3: Individual interviews: with key individuals responsible for developing and overseeing the education initiatives in each city (e.g. policy makers, local government officials, educationalists). Interviews explore the ways in which professionals are attempting to redefine education for a more inclusive city.

▶•Years 2 & 3: Student focus groups & observations of practice: an insight into diverse participant experiences to better understand the lived realities of those engaged in the education project. Focus groups utilise visual and artistic methods and participatory mapping techniques to create participant artefacts.

▶The interviews, observations and focus groups set out to explore how participants are experiencing/conceptualising and/or operationalising the links between an inclusive city and the development of education policy/governance/curriculum or pedagogy.

▶•Year 3: Public discussion event/exhibition developed, curated and led by the children/young people in each city.)

Institutional tensions

University ethics process:

"Why do you need an event or exhibition by CYP for this research?"

"Isn't there a problem with asking for permission to use the photos of the CYP/their first names in the exhibition/event? Why do you need that?"

Department of Education ethics in different cities:

"We only use numbers for CYP in school-based research, no names."

"We don't allow research in schools, unless the academic is from our city. "

Traditional understandings of educational research and ethics.

Professionals *doing to* stakeholders who are characterised by deficits - a **unilateral approach to engagement.**

Children and young people are **too vulnerable** – as Kate Brown (2017) argues – this is often **conflated with troublesome and untrustworthy**

Invisible participants, powerful professionals

Issues arising for institutions

▶ Protection of the vulnerable.

▶ Can we trust children and young people?

▶ Protection of reputation.

▶ Relational and democratic research is seen as very risky!

Education and research have become part of the police in the public sphere – we should be compliant and guardians of the "common sense"
Children and young people need to come out of the private sphere and demand their voice and rights.
 Children and young people (and those of us working with them) should be challenging and demanding a right to talk - this is what marks their agency and humanity.
NB This is very DISRUPTIVE to the status quo.
Do institutional ethics processes encourage compliance rather than social justice and democracy?

Is it necessary for them to be part of the wicked problem we discussed at the beginning?

Meeting the challenges

▶Ethics processes need to **reflect** and **understand** the difference between **unilateral and relational approaches** to educational research.

▶ Children and Young People need to be **recognised as full partners** in the research process, bringing **assets** to a joint endeavour (adapted from Ferlazzo, 2011).

▶Issues of **positionality, status, and power** need to be acknowledged and discussed, including the types of knowledge that are valued and whose interests are being served (Schostak, 2012).

▶Ethics processes need to reflect and understand the difference between unilateral and relational approaches to educational research.

▶ 'Doing with', a relational approach to research, is based on more equal partnerships between professionals and CYP. It recognises CYP as full partners in the research process who have all sorts of assets to bring to bear on a joint endeavour (adapted from Ferlazzo, 2011).

▶In ethics processes with CYP - issues of positionality, status and power… need to be acknowledged and discussed, including the types of knowledge that are valued and whose interests are being served (Schostak, 2012).

▶We hope this goes someway to resolving the wicked problem.

Questions

Starters for ten:

➢ How do we start to address this wicked problem?
➢ How do we strike the balance of protection v agency?
➢ How do we address power imbalances?

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